

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

7 May 2011

Air India pilots strike in second week

Strike action by about 800 pilots from state-owned Air India (AI) has entered its second week, causing the airline to cancel at least 90 percent of its domestic flights. Indian Commercial Pilots' Association (ICPA) members walked off the job on April 26 after the breakdown in pay talks with the airline and the government. The airline has obtained a court order banning the strike, "de-recognised" the IPCA, and shut down the union's offices in Delhi. The Delhi High Court this week issued contempt of court notices to nine sacked IPCA office-bearers.

ICPA members—formerly Indian Airline (IA) pilots now employed by AI after the amalgamation of both airlines in 2007—are demanding pay parity and similar working conditions to their AI colleagues who are members of the Indian Pilots Guild (IPG). While IPCA members are paid according to flying hours and not paid during training, their IPG counterparts receive a fixed salary component, irrespective of the hours they work.

The striking pilots have accused AI management of preparing to privatise the airline and inflaming the dispute by slashing IPCA members' flying-time rosters by 50 percent. While aviation ministry officials have begun talks with the union, AI management has refused to negotiate with the pilots until they return to work.

Bangladesh doctors in Khulna end strike

Intern doctors at the 250-bed Medical College Hospital in Khulna ended a five-day strike on May 2, after hospital management agreed to increase workplace security and consider other demands. The interns struck after one of their colleagues was severely beaten by a patient's frustrated relatives who accused the hospital of taking too long to provide medical aid. The doctors' demands included improved workplace security, registration of visitors and for police to charge those responsible for the attack.

Philippines public transport workers protest fuel prices

Thousands of Panay Island public utility vehicles (PUV) workers returned to work on Wednesday after a two-day strike over rising fuel prices. Passenger services were affected in the cities of Aklan, Capiz, Antique and Iloilo, the island's capital. The strike was part of a national campaign by drivers and operators affiliated with Pinag-isang Samahan ng mga Tsuper at Operator Nationwide (Piston).

Piston members want the Philippines government to remove the 12 percent value-added tax (VAT) on oil products, repeal the Oil Deregulation Law, and stop alleged overpricing of oil products by as much as 7.5 pesos per litre.

Piston members walked out on March 31 on the island of Mindanao. While at least 90 percent (10,000) of Davao city's PUV workers struck, the union in Metro Manila limited the strike after the Land Transportation Franchising and Regulatory Board threatened to cancel the licences of drivers and operators if they joined the protest.

Cambodian garment workers demonstrate

On April 29, over 4,000 workers rallied at the charred remains of the June Textile factory in Phnom Penh to demand an improved compensation offer. The workers, who were laid off over a month ago when the factory burnt down, have accepted a redundancy deal of \$US36 for each employee but rejected an offer of an additional \$20 for every year of employment. They want this increased to \$150 for each year of service.

The workers dispersed after union representatives said the company had agreed to enter negotiations. The union has said it will report back to members on May 8.

Thai chicken processing workers strike

Up to 1,000 Burmese workers at the Sara Farm chicken processing factory in Phetchabun, Thailand downed tools and occupied the factory on April 27 to protest the vicious beating of one of their colleagues by security guards. Strikers protected themselves with sticks and water pipes when guards and police tried to move them from the factory compound.

Two guards and one policeman were disarmed by workers and held briefly, along with a factory manager. Strikers ended their protest when other workers intervened and calmed down the situation.

A local worker told the media that Burmese workers were regularly beaten by heavily armed factory security guards and forced to work under the supervision of an employment agent. Other employees confirmed the abuse with one stating: "The workers have been treated like they are not human." Burmese migrant workers make up around 10 percent of Thailand's workforce.

More strikes at Patrick Stevedores' docks

On Tuesday, 100 Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) members at Patrick Stevedores bulk and general loading dock in Port Kembla, south of Sydney, struck for 24 hours as part of a national campaign for a new enterprise bargain agreement. The action followed 24-hour stoppages last Saturday at Patrick terminals in Brisbane, Port Botany in Sydney, East Swanson in Melbourne and on Monday in Fremantle, Western Australia. Patrick took the matter to Fair Work Australia (FWA) in a bid to introduce a cooling-off period and force an end to industrial action, but on Monday FWA ruled against the company.

Negotiations for a new work agreement have been ongoing for nine months with the company refusing to put forward an offer until last month. Workers took protected strike action in December and January over the dispute and although the MUA since has accused the company of “stalling for a wage pause” it has regularly called off planned industrial action each time Patrick management agreed to resume talks.

The MUA wants annual pay increases of 6 percent over three years, a sign-on bonus of \$5,000 and reduced casual employment. The company has offered annual pay rises of between 4 and 4.5 percent over three years with productivity offsets.

At least 60 percent of Patrick workers are casual and the union has called for long-term casual employees to be offered permanent positions. Port Kembla branch secretary Scott Carter said some members at the dock had been there for 10 years and were still casuals, waiting by the phone each day for a call to go to work. Another issue is improved safety—three port workers were killed in accidents during 2010.

Western Australian hospital support workers stop work

Hospital support workers at the Royal Perth Hospital held a stop-work meeting outside the hospital on Wednesday evening following threats that they will be reprimanded for “failing to wear their staff uniforms correctly.” The United Voice (UV) members have been wearing t-shirts while on duty with the printed message, “Mr Premier, don’t privatise our hospital.”

The protests are part of a limited anti-privatisation campaign by the union begun in March after the Western Australian Industrial Relations Commission (IRC) ordered hundreds of Perth hospital workers to lift protest bans against the state Liberal government’s plan to privatise a range of services at the new Fiona Stanley Hospital in the state capital’s southern suburbs.

The state government announced in March that it would sign a \$3 billion-plus contract with SERCO to supply support services for the hospital, which is still under construction. Workers reject government claims that “anti-privatisation” clauses in a new work agreement signed by the United Voice union in October do not apply to new hospitals. Although the IRC’s order to lift work bans expired on April 4, UV has not since called for new industrial action.

Ballarat council workers maintain bans

At least 300 field workers and 20 health employees at the Ballarat City Council in Victoria are maintaining bans imposed last month over a pay dispute. The Australian Services Union (ASU) and the Australian Nurses Federation (ANF) have been negotiating for over 12 months for a new work agreement that includes a 4 percent annual pay increase over three years. ASU members have not had a pay rise since 2009 and ANF

members have not had an increase since July 2010.

The union bans are on rubbish collection, grounds maintenance, parking fines and restrictions on some child immunisation programs and home cleaning duties.

The council has made a formal pay offer of annual 3.6 percent pay increases over three years, or \$32 per week for low paid workers, to ASU and ANF members. The unions want 4 percent annual pay increases and \$50 per week for low paid workers. A ballot on the council’s offer closes on May 11.

Fairfax journalists protest job cuts

Journalists from Fairfax newspapers in Melbourne and Sydney held stop-work meetings on May 4 to discuss the media group’s plans to outsource sub-editing to Pagemasters, which is owned by a subsidiary of Australian Associated Press (AAP). The move is part of an overall plan to rationalise Fairfax’s production and printing operations.

According to the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA), at least 100 jobs will be axed when the sub-editing of general news, business and sport for the *Sydney Morning Herald*, *Sun-Herald*, *Age* and *Sunday Age* is contracted to Pagemasters. Journalists at the meetings passed a unanimous resolution calling on Fairfax to reverse its decision.

Fairfax journalists in Sydney, Melbourne, Canberra, Newcastle and Wollongong have demanded the MEAA take the issue to Fair Work Australia. The union, which has no intention of fighting the job cuts, has begun discussions on “possible internal alternatives” to outsourcing with management and senior sub-editors.

New Zealand doctors’ union agrees to pay freeze

The Resident Doctors Association (RDA), which represents 3,000 junior doctors in New Zealand government hospitals, decided this week to back a District Health Board (DHB) agreement for a 12-month wage freeze. The union claims the agreement is a win for doctors who are expected to accept the freeze in return for a vague commitment from the DHB to meet every three months with the union to “discuss any issues either side wanted to raise”. This, the RDA insists, would give doctors the opportunity to settle previous grievances and improve working conditions.

The deal, which ends 12 months of negotiations and calls by doctors for strike action, sets a precedent in future wage settlements. DHB spokesperson Graham Dyer gloated over the RDA betrayal declaring it was “good news for the health sector” which will be involved in pay talks with over 80 percent of its staff in the next months.

The doctors’ dispute had been ongoing since late 2009 and followed strikes over pay in 2006 and 2008. Junior doctors last year accepted an interim 2 percent pay increase for 2009/10.



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