

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

6 May 2017

Asia

Bangladesh: Police attack protesting garment workers

At least 20 garment workers were injured when police, using batons, attacked their demonstration which had spilled onto the Dhaka-Tangail Highway on April 27. Workers from the Shed Fashion factory in Ashulia, on the outskirts of Dhaka, were demanding unpaid wages and other arrears. One worker said they had not been paid since January and decided to demonstrate after management failed for the fifth time to pay wages before a promised deadline.

Dhaka garment workers protest

Around 700 garment workers from the factories of Hexa Garments and Alif Textiles demonstrated on the Elephant Road in Dhaka for about four hours on April 27 over outstanding wages. Workers decided to strike after management refused to discuss rumours that the factories would close without paying outstanding wages and entitlements. Workers ended their demonstration after management convinced them that the factories were not closing and wages would be paid at the end of the month.

Pakistan: Disabled Punjab government workers demand wages

Visually-impaired workers in the special education and social welfare departments of the Dera Ghazi Khan Municipal Corporation protested on April 29 over non-payment of their wages. Most of the workers are on daily contracts and said they had not been paid for four months.

Workers demonstrated outside the commissioner's office in the city centre, blocking traffic for several hours. The government ignored a similar protest over the same issue in March.

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa hospital workers strike

Health workers at the Lady Reading Hospital in Peshawar boycotted duties and protested inside the hospital on April 26 over several issues, including a government bill to lift restrictions on the termination of

employees. Other demands were for job permanency for contract workers, a wage rise and payment of a professional allowance.

Their action was the latest in series of limited strikes and protests since last August over these issues and the professional allowance in particular. Workers demanding the allowance include doctors, nurses, paramedics and 20,000 other technicians. While the government has promised on numerous occasions to grant the allowance, it remains unpaid to most workers, including those already entitled to it.

Punjab retired municipal workers demand pension

About 1,400 retired workers of the Rawalpindi Municipal Corporation and 600 former Rawalpindi Division government employees issued a warning on April 29 that they planned a series of protests, including occupation of government offices, if four months' outstanding pensions are not paid immediately. Current municipal workers are supporting the retirees.

According to a media report, the district government has given orders to stop the payments of pensions due to lack of funds. Federal government public expenditure cuts have curtailed payments to provincial governments and city administrations.

India: Madhya Pradesh ambulance workers on strike

Around 3,000 '108' Ambulance Service workers employed by contract company Ziqitza Healthcare in Madhya Pradesh have been on strike since April 26. They are demanding same-work same-pay, an eight-hour work schedule and regular salary payments. The workers have held a 24-hour ongoing protest outside the company's headquarters at the TB Hospital in Bhopal.

Workers began a hunger strike on Tuesday, following failed talks with the government and Ziqitza the previous evening. The company has begun advertising for replacement workers, while the government has begun imposing charges against workers who fail to attend traffic accidents.

Maharashtra municipal garbage and water workers protest

About 200 employees of firms, contracted by Kanak Resources Management to collect garbage door-to-door and maintain the water supply of the Nagpur Municipal Corporation, demonstrated outside the

corporation's executive engineer's office on April 27 to demand the minimum wage.

A union spokesman of the Nagpur Mahanagar Palika Theka Kamgar Sanghthana said that the workers are unregistered immigrants and so are easily exploited. The spokesman said that the unskilled and skilled workers are only paid between 7,280 to 8,500 rupees (\$US132) a month. The official minimum wage for these workers is between 11,500 to 14,000 rupees (\$218) a month. The workers are also not paid entitlements such as rent and dearness allowances.

Indonesia: Freeport mine workers strike

Around 8,000 workers from Freeport's massive Grasberg copper mine in West Papua rallied in the town of Timika (close to the mine) on Monday to begin a month-long strike over mass lay-offs. Employees of contractors and affiliated companies will join the strike on May 9. The workers are organised by the Chemical, Energy and Mining Workers Unit of PT Freeport Indonesia's All Indonesian Workers Union (PUK SP-KEP).

Freeport has laid off 10 percent of its 32,000 workforce and warned that it could cut another 5,000 due to reduced production as a result of the ongoing dispute between the company and the Indonesian government over its contract.

New government rules require Freeport to obtain a new mining permit, divest a 51 percent stake, build a second copper smelter, relinquish arbitration rights and pay new taxes and royalties. One aspect of the new laws is to restrict the export of minerals mined in the Indonesian archipelago in an attempt to divert them to domestic industries. Freeport estimated that its production at Grasberg could be reduced by 60 percent.

Australia and the Pacific

Freight train drivers in Victoria locked out

Members of the Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU), employed by Pacific National's (PN) Rural and Bulk division in Victoria walked off the job for 48 hours on Monday in a dispute over the company's proposed enterprise agreement (EA). The company immediately announced it intended to lock the workers out for the week. Thousands of tonnes of produce from Victoria's rural areas have been transferred onto road transport, with one company claiming it has increased truck trips by 634 a day. PN is Australia's largest freight rail company.

The drivers' enterprise agreement expired last December. The union claims that PN wants drivers to take pay cuts of up to \$19,000 per year and give up travel conditions that will force them to start and finish up to 120km away from their home at their own expense and on their own time.

The union says that PN is also seeking pay cuts of up to \$10 an hour. The current hourly rate for experienced drivers is \$52.74. This is an aggregate wage incorporating shift penalties, weekend penalties and various allowances. The company wants to remove all penalties, shift loadings and annual leave loading from the aggregate wage, which the union said would reduce the wage to \$42.58 an hour. In addition PN is demanding that guaranteed work be reduced from 40 to 38 hours a week.

The RTBU is also opposing PN's increasing use of labour hire workers. It has placed a ban on training labour hire workers, which began on March

22 and continues indefinitely.

Victorian plywood mill workers remain locked out

Over 200 workers at Carter Holt Harvey plywood mill at Myrtleford in Victoria's northeast remain locked out since April 19 in a dispute over a new work agreement. The workers, who are members of the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU), Electrical Trades Union of Australia and Australian Manufacturing Workers' Union, are currently picketing the mill but have been isolated by the unions.

The current union claim is for a 3 percent pay rise annually over three years, one week's annual leave allowable in the Christmas holiday period, and better access to income protection insurance. A CFMEU spokesman said the company wanted one nationwide agreement for all its sites and has imposed a 2 percent pay increase at its Tumut and Morwell mills.

New South Wales dock workers escalate bans

Two hundred Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) members at Patrick Stevedores' Port Botany terminal in Sydney have stepped up existing work bans on certain containers to cover all rail freight movement through the terminal. The industrial action follows a 24-hour strike last week. Patrick responded by beginning to stand down MUA members who are defying a Federal Court injunction against their action.

The dispute began last month when Qube Logistics, which took over Patrick last year, began shipping containers through what was previously an unused part of the terminal. The terminal is not covered by the MUA's current enterprise agreement and truck drivers are performing the work.

The MUA insists that Patrick is outsourcing work traditionally performed by wharfies, including forklift, reach stacker, clerical and foreman duties. Patrick has begun legal action against the union claiming the "unprotected industrial action" is costing it \$500,000 per day. The union, which has opposed joint industrial action by other MUA members, has a long record of using threats of draconian legal action by employers to shut down industrial action and doing back room deals that accommodate to employers' demands.

Victoria: Fletcher Insulation workers' strike in tenth week

Ninety workers at Fletcher Insulation in Dandenong, Victoria are maintaining strike action begun on February 17 and have established a 24-hour picket outside the company plant. The Australian Workers' Union (AWU) members walked off the job after being offered an enterprise agreement that cuts working conditions and imposes a four-year pay freeze.

The union told the media that Fletcher Insulation wants to increase working hours—the current glass industry standard is 35 hours a week—and remove minimum manning levels from the agreement. Workers are also concerned that Fletcher wants unlimited use of casual workers and slash existing redundancy provisions. Fletcher applied to the Fair Work Commission (FWC) in March to terminate the workplace agreement which if successful would reduce workers' pay by over 50 percent.

Saipan casino construction workers continue protests

Employees of a subcontractor building the multimillion-dollar Imperial Pacific Resort on the Pacific island of Saipan in the Northern Marianas, marched to the Garapan construction site on April 28. They were protesting unpaid wages, “sub-standard” living conditions and broken promises. The Chinese workers said they had not been paid by Gold Mantis Construction Decoration (CNMI) since February. Over 90 Chinese workers at the construction site, managed by contractor MCC International Saipan, a unit of state-owned Metallurgical Corporation of China Ltd, began protesting in early April over the issues.



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