

Jet Airways employees demonstrate in India; Pakistan doctors protest privatisation; Queensland bulk haulage train and maintenance workers to strike

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

20 April 2019

## India: Jet Airways workers demand unpaid salaries

Hundreds of Jet Airways employees protested at Delhi airport on April 13 to demand the debt-laden company pay weeks of outstanding wages and entitlements.

The protest came a few days before the privately owned, Mumbai-based airline announced on April 17 that it was halting all domestic and international flights after failing to secure emergency funding from lenders.

Jet Airways was once India's second biggest by market share but is on the brink of collapse with debts of more than \$1.4 billion. The company had asked a consortium of lenders led by the State Bank of India to urgently provide four billion rupees or about \$100 million but no finance was forthcoming. The company cancelled hundreds of flights in recent weeks.

An estimated 20,000 jobs are threatened if the company is declared bankrupt. Shilium, a striking maintenance worker, told the media, "We feel great despair and frustration. We want our salaries, at the same time we want to save the airline."

## Bangladesh garment workers demand reopening of factories

Over one thousand garment workers in Savar and Ashulia blocked roads on Tuesday to demand payment of outstanding wages and reopening of factories' roads.

Police used water cannons to disperse hundreds of protesting Azim Group workers who demonstrated for last month's wages. Union officials called off the protest after Savar Model Police Station officers said factory authorities had told them the arrears would be paid within two days.

In Ashulia, around 1,500 Yagi Bangladesh Garments workers protested to demand outstanding holiday payments by this month. The factory authorities, who had shut their factory, said they would pay the holiday payment this year.

In Kathgora about 500 Omorfu Sweater workers demonstrated to demand their factory be reopened. Management closed the plant indefinitely on April 13 after workers demanded a higher salary previously agreed under the new wage structure.

## Rajshahi University teachers in Bangladesh strike

Rajshahi University of Engineering and Technology (RUET) teachers held a two-and-a-half hour work stoppage on Tuesday over four demands.

They want payment of an earned increase, an end to salary discriminations for lecturers, earlier payment of salaries and higher pay for recently appointed teachers.

The RUET Teachers Association general secretary told the media that union members had made these demands over a longer period of time but had been ignored by university authorities. The teachers decided to strike after management refused to even pay the outstanding pay increase by Monday.

The RUET vice chancellor said the scheduled pay increases stopped following a direction from the University Grants Commission.

## Bangladesh water transport unions end indefinite strike action

Bangladesh Water Transport Workers Federation (BWTWF) officials called off ongoing strike action on Wednesday following management promises to settle 11 demands by workers within the next 45 days.

Indefinite strike action began on Tuesday following a collapse in talks on Monday between the shipping ministry and BWTWF.

The union's demands include full implementation of the 2016 pay scale; an end to extortion and robbery in the river transport industry; provision of appointment letters, identity cards and service books to transport workers; and 1 million taka (\$US 11,847) compensation if a worker is killed on the job.

The stoppage of passenger and goods vessels mainly affected two seaports and major river ports.

## Bangladesh jute mill workers end protests

A state-owned jute mills workers' strike was called off on Tuesday after factory authorities assured union officials they would grant a nine-point log of claims. Jute workers from 26 state-owned jute mills in Khulna,

Jashore and Chattogram resumed strike action and road and rail blockades on Monday.

Bangladesh Jute Workers' League officials urged strikers to return to work, claiming they had reached an agreement following a joint meeting with the labour directorate, the Bangladesh Jute Mills Corporation and the State Minister for Labour Affairs.

Fearful that the strike would spread, employers have agreed to pay 10 weeks' wages and entitlements by April 25 and to include all workers in the National Wage Commission attendance sheets by May 18. Other demands are expected to be discussed in the future.

### **Pakistan: Khyber Pakhtunkhwa doctors protest privatisation**

Government hospital doctors in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province boycotted work this week in protest against privatisation of healthcare services.

The strike affected all hospital services, apart from emergency departments. Members of the Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa Doctors Council marched from the Lady Reading Hospital to the Provincial Assembly in Peshawar.

Under Pakistan's Medical Teaching Institutions Reforms Act, hospitals and other state-backed health facilities will have to fund these institutions themselves.

Hospital doctors in Balochistan held a two-day strike on April 6 and 7 in protest against the rundown of healthcare facilities in their province.

### **Khyber Pakhtunkhwa workers demand permanent jobs**

Over 120 workers from the state-owned Haripur Heavy Electrical Complex began a hunger strike on Wednesday after the authorities failed to meet their demands on April 16.

The complex, which produces electrical transformers for government departments, has imposed a labour contract employment system to reduce the wage costs of about 260 workers. Workers have established a protest camp outside the facility and warned that they will continue the hunger strike until their demands are met.

### **Australia: Limited strike action at Telstra continues**

Limited industrial action in a dispute for a new enterprise agreement at Telstra, Australia's largest telecommunications provider, entered its fifth week. The Communications Electrical Plumbing Union (CEPU), which covers over 3,000 Telstra technicians, has called more token strikes while maintaining limited work bans imposed after a 24-hour stoppage on March 12.

On Wednesday, the union called for field technicians to extend current strike action from April 12 to April 18 for another three days: April 24, 26 and 30. The action consists of half-hour work stoppages between 7 and 8am. Work bans covering overtime and emergency call-outs of field staff are being maintained. Workers have also been directed not to respond to requests from offshore operations centres on April 23, 24 and 26.

The union claims that this action is designed to "send a clear message to Telstra." In reality, it is dragging out the dispute to wear down workers'

resolve and impose a sell-out agreement.

After one year of negotiations, CEPU members rejected the company's proposed pay rise of 4.5 percent over the next three years. This amounts to an increase of just 1.5 percent per year, well below the official rate of inflation. The union has called for a meagre 12 percent wage rise over three years.

### **Bus drivers in Tasmania to strike**

Bus drivers in Tasmania's capital Hobart will stop work between 3pm and 7pm on April 23. The stoppage will affect around 500 services in the afternoon peak period. Members of the Rail Tram and Bus Union will attend a meeting at the Springfield depot to discuss their pay dispute with the state owned transport provider Metro Tasmania.

Some 92 percent of drivers rejected the government's enterprise agreement which offered a 2 percent per annum pay increase. This would be the equivalent to a 1 percent wage cut, given that inflation in Hobart is 3 percent. Metro claimed the company was keeping within the Liberal government's 2 percent cap on annual pay increases for all public sector workers.

Drivers also complained that the company's proposed enterprise agreement would leave them in the bus seat for five hours at a time without a toilet break.

### **Aurizon bulk haulage train crew to strike**

Unions covering more than 1,000 train crew and maintenance workers in the Queensland cargo rail haulage network notified Aurizon of separate 24-hour stoppages on April 23, 24 and 25. Bulk rail carries grain, sugar, cement and other freight. Each strike will be followed by a 7-day ban on overtime work.

The stoppages are part of long-running industrial action called by the Rail Tram and Bus Union, the Australian Federated Union of Locomotive Employees, the Electrical Trades Union and the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union.

The dispute began in December over Aurizon's proposed new enterprise agreement. The unions have restricted action to 24-hour strikes by isolated sections of the company's coal and bulk freight network. Workers have not had a pay increase for 16 months.

### **New Zealand Big Ben pie workers strike**

Big Ben pies production workers struck Wednesday night and Thursday over a pay dispute. About 30 workers established a picket outside the George Weston Foods factory in Wiri, South Auckland.

The FIRST Union has been in bargaining with the company since September last year. The employer has offered two 2 percent increases over a 22-month term, which is inadequate to keep the bottom two pay rates in the agreement above the minimum wage.

The current bottom rate has already been overtaken twice by the minimum wage, which was recently lifted to \$NZ17.70 an hour. Most of the workers are now on \$18-\$19 an hour, including some who have been with the company for 20 years.

George Weston Foods is owned by the Weston family of Canada and the UK, who have a recorded wealth of more than \$19 billion. The company also manufactures Tip Top, Bûrgen and Ploughmans bread, and Golden crumpets. It is one of the two main players in the domestic bread market.



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