

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

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The *World Socialist Web Site* invites workers and other readers to contribute to this regular feature by e-mailing information to: editor@wsws.org

Indian insurance workers strike for two days

Some 80,000 workers in four public sector general insurance companies held a two-day strike on March 23 to demand higher wages, the implementation of promotions and in opposition to privatisation. The insurance workers contend that the Indian government is trying to increase foreign direct investment (FDI) in the insurance sector and “outsource” health insurance. The strike brought business transactions in the four insurance companies—New India Assurance, National Insurance, Oriental Insurance and United India Insurance—to standstill throughout the country.

Striking employees demonstrated in several cities, including Madurai and Dindigul in Tamil Nadu, and Kozhikode and Kochi in Kerala. According to General Insurance Employees All India Association president Gurudas Dasgupta, India’s finance minister P. Chidambaram had refused a salary increase for insurance workers when they met earlier. Workers are now threatening a prolonged strike if their demands are not met.

Public sector workers in Sri Lanka protest privatisation

Power, oil and bank workers in Sri Lankan state-owned industries held protests on March 28 and 29 against privatisation.

Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB) employees boycotted work on March 28 and around 2,000 power workers from across the country gathered outside CEB head office in central Colombo in protest over government plans to divide the CEB into eight separate divisions in preparation for privatisation.

The government planned to hold a cabinet meeting in the afternoon to make a decision on the restructuring plan.

Oil workers at the Ceylon Petroleum Corporation (CPC) stopped work from 11 a.m. and picketed the Sapugaskanda refinery near Colombo, Kollonnawa storage facility and CPC’s head office in Colombo. They were protesting the sale of a third of CPC shares to Bharath Petroleum, an Indian oil company. CPC normally issues 4,750 metric tons per day but this was cut to only 500 metric tons by the industrial action causing long queues at the filling stations. Oil workers later joined the CEB employees outside the CEB head office and held a joint protest until 3.00 p.m.

Union leaders called off the protests following a letter by the minister for power and energy indicating that a scheduled cabinet meeting to decide on the changes at CEB and CPC had been cancelled. Workers have threatened further protests unless the restructuring and privatisation plans are withdrawn.

On March 29 state bank workers picketed the Peoples Bank headquarters in central Colombo in opposition to plans to privatise the banks, impose harsher working conditions and end bank employees’ pension schemes.

Health workers strike over staffing issues

Medical Laboratory Technicians (MLTs) in Sri Lanka’s health sector went on strike for two days on March 28 at the National Hospital in

Colombo, Colombo South Teaching Hospital, Ragama Hospital and Central Blood Bank.

The strike, following industrial action by MLTs on March 23, was in opposition to a shift-based service system designed to cover up staff shortages. Technicians claim that while there is a need for 3,000 MLTs there are only 1,200.

A union spokesman said that the government is maintaining staff shortages and running down the service in preparation for privatisation. He warned that if there was no satisfactory solution to the issues MLTs would begin indefinite strike action.

Dentists held a two-day strike on March 28 to demand modernisation of school dental clinics and the recruitment of more dentists. According to the strikers, 300 dentists graduated 2001 but none were recruited to the dental service. They are threatening an indefinite strike.

Teachers demand improved working conditions

On March 23, around 500 teachers from Ratnapura and Kegalle picketed the Sabaragamuwa provincial council for two hours on March 23. They were protesting against haphazard transfer methods, difficulties obtaining loans and other hardships faced by teachers.

Power loom workers end hunger strike

Power loom workers ended an 11-day hunger strike in Faisalabad, Pakistan on March 25 after the government agreed to a 7 percent wage increase. It also promised to register all industrial units with the Department of Social Security and other relevant departments to ensure workers’ basic rights.

The assurance was given at a meeting of union leaders, power loom owners and district government officers called to resolve the dispute. Workers testified that they had been forced to work in unhygienic conditions and were paid inadequate wages. They pointed out that power loom owners had agreed to a pay increase and guarantees of basic conditions and rights. District government functionaries had, however, failed to enforce the agreement.

Filipino traffic aids cheated out of four months pay

Traffic enforcers in the Philippines city of Bacolod have lodged a complaint with the city council over Mayor Evelio Leonardia’s continued refusal to pay them outstanding salaries from August to December 2004.

A spokesman for the 64 traffic enforcers told *Sun Star-Bacolod* that there were sufficient funds for them to be paid because Leonardia had approved an assistance package of 5,000 pesos (\$US89.30) per worker to cover training expenses. The City Budget Office had also released 5.4 million pesos for the traffic enforcers’ salaries.

Leonardia claims that he did not promise the enforcers any payment when they accepted the “voluntary” traffic enforcer jobs. A workers’ spokesman said that they have documents establishing that they were city council employees and will press charges against the mayor if he continues to refuse to approve the salary release.

Teachers and aides oppose cuts to working hours

Teachers and their aides throughout Queensland have announced protest meetings on April 4 to oppose the state Labor government’s plans to cut

working hours for teacher's aides by 50 percent, from 30 to 15 hours weekly.

Teachers insist that prep classes with 25 pupils or more require an aid for 30 hours in term 1 and 25 hours for the rest of the year. Cutting back on aides' time will seriously undermine supervision and lower education standards. The meetings were called by the Liquor Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers Union and the Queensland Teachers Association.

Emergency workers to oppose superannuation cuts

Firefighters and ambulance officers in Victoria are threatening industrial action over plans by the state Labor government to cut back superannuation payments. The proposed legislation will reduce compulsory annual payments from 8.4 to 7.5 percent of the yearly salary and will cut government contributions by about \$20 million. Emergency Services Union officials claim this will mean final pay-outs could be slashed by up to \$100,000 for some members of the scheme.

The changes to superannuation could be made law mid-year. Union members will meet at the Dallas Brooks Centre in Melbourne on April 19 to determine what action they will take. The media reported that unnamed source said firefighters would walk off the job if the government refuses to back down. The Victoria Police Association said it opposes the changes and industrial action by police could not be ruled out, including bans on issuing fines and overtime.

New Zealand university pay dispute goes to mediation

The Association of University Staff (AUS) and the University of Auckland will go into mediation next week while the Employment Authority considers whether a deepening dispute over bargaining should be referred to the Employment Court for a decision. The AUS commenced legal action after Auckland's vice-chancellor failed to show up for negotiations for a preliminary national employment agreement in Wellington and offered non-union staff a 4.5 percent salary increase.

Tension between the parties escalated further when the university implied that it would cut off the AUS's access to the university's email system after the Association wrote to non-union staff encouraging them to join the union. Only 30 percent of staff are union members. The university is refusing to enter multi-employer bargaining and will only bargain at a local enterprise level.

New Zealand health support staff to strike

Industrial action by clerical and administrative staff at Waikato District Health Board (DHB) is likely after mediation talks last week failed to resolve a pay dispute. The Public Service Association (PSA) served notice of industrial action for the seven days beginning April 11 after clerical and administrative staff rejected a 1.5 percent pay increase. The offer is well below pay settlements given to other workers employed by the DHB.

During the negotiations the DHB repackaged its offer, proposing an extended term for the agreement. Workers rejected the package, which would have locked in a long-term arrangement with annual increases below the cost of living. The union has agreed to continue negotiations.

New Zealand bus drivers' unions cancels stop-work

A stop-work meeting of South Auckland bus drivers was cancelled at the last minute on March 30, after the four unions involved in the wages dispute said they expected a new pay offer from bus company Stagecoach. The company indicated that it could table a new offer at negotiations held on the previous day.

The planned stop-work meeting involving about 1,000 drivers at Stagecoach's Wiri depot would have forced the company to cancel all its South Auckland services between 11 a.m. and 3 p.m. A meeting by about 40 drivers at the company's smaller Penrose depot on March 29 forced the cancellation of 19 services. The unions intend to maintain two out of three work bans for at least two more days. The bans involved drivers working to rule and missing the last trip of their working day if they were running late. A ban on voluntary overtime was suspended.

The drivers began working to rule last week and banned voluntary

overtime to demand an increase in the hourly rate from \$13.94 to \$16. The company had offered an initial 7.6 percent increase lifting the rate to \$15, to be followed by 2.2 percent next year and the same percentage rise in 2007.

Displaced garment workers stranded in Saipan

Over 1,000 displaced immigrant garment workers are stranded on Saipan in the Commonwealth of the Northern Marianas Islands (CNMI) in the Pacific. They have no prospect of regaining employment or any means of returning home. Most have no money and are relying on friends for food and accommodation.

Eleven displaced Sako Corp garment workers held a seven-hour rally outside the Governor's Office in Saipan on March 18 seeking help for repatriation to China. One of the workers said that they decided to hold the rally because the Department of Labor, as well as the Division of Immigration, refused to help them.

The workers were displaced by the closure of three garment factories and the downsizing of others caused by lifting of trade quotas in the US last January. Under the law, employers are required to repatriate retrenched workers but in many cases factories close without notice and the owners flee the country, leaving their former employees stranded.

Telecom Fiji plans mass sackings

On March 21, Telecom Fiji Limited (TFI) revealed a restructuring plan requiring up to 50 percent of its 1,200 staff to take a redundancy package. Under the plan, to be implemented in May this year, entire work units will be disbanded and the work outsourced.

TFI will offer all staff a severance package consisting of three month's pay plus an extra two week's pay for each year of service. There is no guarantee that staff refusing "voluntary" redundancy will not be retrenched if the required number of job losses is not obtained. During the "second phase" of the restructure remaining staff will be judged on performance and workers on contract will not be re-employed.

The Fiji Post and Telecom Employees Association (FPTEA) is not opposing the plan. FPTEA general secretary Attar Singh said that he accepted the restructure plan but in order to keep face warned of possible strike action if any union member was forced to leave.

In a circular last week Singh said TFL's previous "no redundancy policy" had allowed the FPTEA to cooperate with the company during the last decade. This included the union giving concessions during the December 2004 round of annual negotiations. Singh attempted to split FPTEA along national lines, demanding that all expatriates employed by TFI be sacked and their jobs handed over to locals "at much less pay".

Fiji public service workers faces huge staff cuts

On March 29, Fiji Public Service Commission chairman Stuart Hugget announced plans for a major restructure of the country's public service. It involved cutting the existing 23 departments to 8 and could see staff numbers cut by two-thirds. Hugget claimed that the wages bill of the current 25,000 public servants is too high. While promising to consult widely with employees and the unions Hugget, wants the restructure in place by 2007.

Government workers strike for back pay

At least 1,300 workers employed by Fiji's Public Works Department went on strike for three hours nationwide on March 30 demanding the government pay outstanding overtime. The amounts owed are for work as far back as December 2002.

Public Employees Union-Letuka president Jiuta Waqatabu said the workers were fed up of being told they would receive payment for overtime only to find out otherwise. He said the union would apply for a 28-day notice to hold a secret ballot on a strike motion.



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