Workers struggles around the world: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

14 November 1998

Beginning today the World Socialist Web Site*'s weekly feature, "Workers struggles around the world," will be posted three times a week, instead of only on Saturdays. In order to improve the presentation of these reports for our readers they will be divided by geographical regions. On Tuesday we will list struggles from the Americas; on Thursday from Europe, Russia, the Middle East and Africa; and on Saturdays from Asia, Australia and the Pacific. We invite all workers and others to contribute to this feature by e-mailing information to* editor@wsws.org

Asia

• South Korean workers protest sackings
• Chinese textile workers laid off
• Workers' strikes in Indonesia
• Indonesian workers killed in construction accident

Australia and the Pacific

• Victorian construction workers reject pay offer
• Australian mining company prosecuted
• Meat workers conditions under attack
• Papua New Guinea Telikom workers end strike

Asia

South Korean workers protest sackings

More than 10,000 riot police surrounded a mass rally called by the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions and other organisations this week to protest the mounting wave of layoffs by the country's major industrial conglomerates and banks.

Thousands of workers, supporters, farmers and teachers attended the rally. Speakers called for an end to the sackings, the early settlement of debts owed to the farmers, government recognition of a newly formed teachers union and a cut in defence spending in order to provide funds for the unemployed.

Union leaders condem

ned the government for allowing layoffs. However, the layoff process was only legalised and stepped up after the unions entered into a tripartite accord in February accepting the companies' right to downsize "under urgent managerial circumstances".

In line with the agreement, the unions have acted to isolate and close down strikes that erupted across the country this year in opposition to layoffs. A recent report by the Korea Labour Research Institute said that joblessness is expected to reach a record high of more than 8.5 percent or 1.83 million during the first half of next year.

To top of page

Chinese textile workers laid off

Over 450,000 workers have been laid off from China's state-owned textile industries following sweeping government restructuring. Last month the industry cut the number of spindles by 4.23 million and reduced production by 90 percent.

Chief of the State Textile Industry Bureau Du Yuzhou said the government plans to lay off 1.2 million workers over the next three years. He said that state firms would only receive government subsidies if management carried out the job cuts.

To top of page

Workers' strikes in Indonesia

Three hundred bicycle manufacturing workers in Kletek, Sepanjang (East Java), marched in protest to the Provincial Legislative Assembly in Sidoarjo on November 12. The workers were angered over their company's decision to close down a factory and pay only half of their wages. According to one worker the company proposed to pay 70 percent of the wages, but was ordered by the Department of Labour to pay in full. The plant shutdown was apparently in response to the workers' decision to join a trade union.

In Tangerang (West Java) 400 ceramic workers at PT Maha Keramindo Perkasa have been on strike since November 7. The strike started when the company refused to meet workers' demands for a wage rise.

In Surabaya, the second largest city in Indonesia, 200 drivers and helpers from the transportation company PT Surabaya Ekspres have refused to work since November 9. The strike has paralysed the company's shipping operations from the port of Surabaya, Tanjung Perak. The workers are raising three demands: wage increases, money for travelling and work-related expenses and help for injured workers.

To top of page

© World Socialist Web Site

Indonesian workers killed in construction accident

Twelve workers were killed and two remain missing after the collapse of a steel structure which they were pulling to the surface from a tunnel 300 meters below. The accident on November 9 occurred at the Batutegi dam project, about 90 kilometres west of Bandar Lampung (Lampung-Sumatra), when the steel cable the structure was connected to snapped. The structure fell back into the tunnel where 47 workers were working. Thirty-three workers suffered broken bones, lacerations and other injuries and were sent to the nearest hospital.

Witnesses said the accident could have been avoided if the workers had been removed from the tunnel. According to one operator the accident was caused by the carelessness of field monitors who work always in a hurry in order to meet production quotas.

To top of page

Australia and the Pacific

Victorian construction workers reject pay offer

Two hundred fifty construction workers walked off the job November 6 at the Longford oil and gas refinery in Victoria, Australia. The workers went on strike after rejecting a pay offer by major contractors hired to carry out repairs at the plant by the refinery owners Esso Australia.

A huge gas explosion at the Longford refinery in September killed two workers and cut natural gas supplies to the entire state of Victoria for two weeks. Gas production has resumed but oil refining is still at a standstill. The company aimed at restoring full oil production by December, saying the delay is costing $1 million dollars a day in lost profits.

A spokesman for the Australian Workers Union said that the contractor companies have already begun legal action against individual workers over the strike which they claim is illegal. Essos's offshore workers have also threatened to go on strike if the wage dispute is not settled.

To top of page

Australian mining company prosecuted

Western Mining Corporation was found to have caused the deaths of two mine workers at its Long Victor Nickel mine in Western Australia earlier this year.

Drill operator Kerry Everatt and his assistants were crushed to death in a rock fall while operating equipment 600 metres underground. The company was found guilty of six charges brought against it by the WA Department of Minerals and Energy, including failure to provide a safe working environment.

Mining deaths in Australia have risen to an average of 27 per year since 1988. In 1996-97 a total of 33 miners were killed. In Western Australia the number of deaths rose from 4 in 1994 to 11 last year.

To top of page

Meat workers conditions under attack

The Australian Industrial Relations Commission brought down a decision at the beginning of November to allow an unspecified abattoir owner to eliminate the tally system of payment and cut wages.

Under the tally system, workers are only required to kill a specified number of animals per day. Once the tally is finished they can cease work. The elimination of this system, a move supported by the Howard government and the National Farmer Federation, would allow the employers to drive up productivity and lower pay throughout the meat industry.

When the Howard government introduced the Work Place Relations Act in 1996 to strip back national awards, it claimed that workers would be protected under the "no disadvantage" clause. However, the legislation also specified that the clause could be discarded if the changes sought were proven to be in the "public interest".

The abattoir owner claimed that the company was facing financial hardship and would have to close down if forced to maintain the present rates of pay. Undoubtedly the decision will lead to many such cases in which companies will plead that it is in the "public interest" to cut workers' wages.

Papua New Guinea Telikom workers end strike

Workers employed by PNG Telikom have ended a two-week strike after the government of Prime Minister Bill Skate agreed to restore outstanding superannuation payments. The government suspended paying its share of superannuation contributions when workers were transferred from the Post and Telecommunications Corporation to the privatised companies--Telikom, Post PNG Ltd and Pangtel--over two years ago.

The government owed more than 24 million kina which will now be paid in three instalments over a 12-month period, with the final payment before the end of November next year. The union has agreed to share the costs of a legal action launched by Post PNG and Telikom against the striking workers. Workers first launched rolling stoppages in early July, but suspended all-out strike action following the Aitape tidal wave disaster.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site