Asia, Australia and the Pacific

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Factory explosion kills three children in the Philippines

A factory owner has been detained after three children were killed by an explosion in a firework factory in Barangay Bunlo in the Philippines at the end of last week.

They were with their mothers who were working at the plant wrapping pyrotechnic materials. The explosion occurred when a finished product ignited during tested.

The children were Kenneth Osaban aged three, his two-year-old brother Russell and three-year-old Mark John Yocab. The children's mothers and another worker were also badly injured by the blast.

The factory owner, Jessie Barcenas, was charged with a breach of the labour laws. Most of those employed in the factory were under 18 years of age.

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Hong Kong bank workers face pay freeze

The Hang Seng Bank in Hong Kong announced last week that it will impose a pay freeze on its 7,800 workers next year. The decision follows a similar wage freeze on the 13,000 staff at the Hong Kong Bank, Hang Seng's parent company.

A company spokesman said that the decision, taken at Hang Seng's board meeting last Thursday, was designed to 'make substantial savings'. Profits for the HSBC Group, which includes Hang Seng Bank, dropped 41 percent in the first part of this year to $6 billion.

An official of the Clerical and Professional Employees Association said that the conditions of banking staff have been under constant threat since the onset of the country's economic turmoil this year. 'Some banks have started lay-offs while others are cutting overtime,' he said.

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Benefits for Hong Kong contract workers cut

Hong Kong's Urban and Regional Services will cut the gratuities of the 1,000 contract workers presently employed by the department. The gratuities paid at the end of the contract are presently set at 25 percent of basic salary but will be cut to 15 percent for skilled workers and to 10 percent for the unskilled.

A report by the department also recommends that the workers should be given employment for a maximum of three years and should not be offered permanent positions with the government service at the end of their contract. Contract workers receive no housing or medical benefits.

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Nurses oppose job cuts

Nurses at the Wollongong Hospital on the NSW South Coast are threatening to take industrial action early next year in opposition to plans by the state government to destroy 160 jobs, including 64 nursing positions. The hospital currently has 348 beds serviced by 550 nursing staff.

A union spokesman said that the workload of nurses had already lead to an 'unsafe' working environment at the hospital. 'Until last October many permanent nurses were working three double shifts every week,' she said.

The workload was only reduced after the hospital authorities closed down two wards and 18 beds freeing some nurses for extra shifts. On December 10, the nurses voted to close even more beds if staffing was cut.

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No reinstatement for Gordonstone miners

The full bench of the Australian Industrial Relations Commission (AIRC) last week overturned an earlier ruling by Commissioner Errol Hodder requiring the reinstatement of 312 miners sacked last October from the Gordonstone mine near Emerald in central Queensland.

The US-owned mining company ARCO sacked its entire workforce and closed the mine as a means to recruit a new workforce and to impose a range of new working conditions. When the company began to advertise, Hodder ruled that the jobs must be offered to the previous employees first. ARCO is presently negotiating the sale of the mine to Rio Tinto.

The Gordonstone dispute gained national attention last year when ARCO hired scores of armed security guards to intimidate the sacked miners and their families. The union organised no industrial action in support of the Gordonstone miners and took the case into the AIRC. The sacked workers have been picketing the mine for almost 14 months.

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Sacked PNG university workers underpaid

Maintenance and cleaning workers sacked by the University of Papua New Guinea in early October have only just received their redundancy payments. Many are angry that they have received far less than their entitlements based on years of service. A union spokesman said that some of the payments were so low the money would not even last workers until the end of the year.