

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

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## Asia

- Thai workers receive no compensation
- South Korean jobs targeted
- South Korean government stalls on teachers' claims
- Hong Kong waste paper workers face dismissal
- Unemployed workers protest in Hong Kong
- Taiwan oil workers strike

## Australia and the Pacific

- South Australian teachers to strike
- Textile workers locked out
- Maritime workers picket
- Public sector workers strike
- PNG minister announces sackings

### **Thai workers receive no compensation**

A seminar held in Bangkok last week revealed that hundreds of Thai workers with occupational and work-related diseases receive no compensation.

Somboon Sriamdokkae, the head of the Council of Work and Environmental Related Patients' Network, told the seminar that, 'most judges and lawyers didn't believe there was such a thing as occupational diseases and tended to blame workers for fabricating their stories to claim compensation'.

She said that there were over 200 cases of occupational diseases received by the Labour Ministry every year but the courts only awarded payments for obvious injuries 'such as bleeding, bruises and handicap injuries.'

Somboon told delegates that most of the workers who came to the council for help were from the textile and electronic industries. Many of the textile workers suffered with asbestosis while the electronic workers had high levels of aluminum in their blood. Over 200,000 work-related injuries are reported in Thailand each year.

### **South Korean jobs targeted**

The South Korean government has endorsed plans to

slash another 1,165 jobs from its total workforce of 273,982 by early next year. Under the scheme, six embassies, seven consulates general and one department at the Institute of Foreign Affairs and National Security are to be closed. The Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade is to be responsible for drawing up a similar job reduction program every three years starting from 2001.

The country's top five chaebol (major conglomerates), employing more than a total of 600,000 people, have just announced major restructuring plans. They have pledged to halve the number of affiliates through liquidation, sell-offs or spin-offs that will result in the destruction of between 100,000 to 150,000 jobs.

According to official figures, unemployment in South Korea now stands at 7.3 percent or 1.57 million people. But because the statistics do not include workers who have given up looking for a job, the actual number of unemployed is closer to the two million.

### **South Korean government stalls on teachers' claims**

South Korea's labour unions have threatened to launch a national campaign of industrial action next year if the National Assembly fails to ratify a bill to allow teachers to form unions. Granting union rights to teachers was one of number of minimal concessions agreed by the government earlier this year in exchange for union cooperation in imposing layoffs and the destruction of working conditions.

A decision on the bill is being held up while the government and rival political parties argue about which standing committee should deliberate on the issue. Leading members of the government's coalition partner, the right-wing United Liberal Democrats (ULD), oppose the bill outright.

The unions are also demanding legislation to lower the retirement age of teachers from 65 years to 62. The opposition party, the Grand National Party (GNP) has rejected the demand and the ULD has insisted that the retirement age should not drop below 63.

### **Hong Kong waste paper workers face dismissal**

Waste paper recycling workers in Hong Kong have been caught in a dispute between the recycling companies and the government. The companies are threatening to sack more than 1,000 workers if they do not get government assistance and subsidies. They are also demanding the government buy recycled paper at prices that at least cover operating costs.

According to an industry spokesman, without assistance more than a quarter of the companies will close down early next year. The industry presently employs about 6,000 workers.

### **Unemployed workers protest in Hong Kong**

A group of unemployed workers marched to the office of Chief Executive Tung Chee-hwa in Hong Kong last week to present a petition with 2,000 signatures, demanding that the government act to stem the growth of job destruction.

A spokesman for the group said many unemployed workers were disqualified from finding alternative employment because of 'age discrimination and academic qualifications'. The group demanded the government set up an unemployment fund and introduce a minimum wage for the unemployed.

### **Taiwan oil workers strike**

Oil workers at the state owned Chinese Petroleum Corp (CPC) in Taiwan will strike for 24 hours on January 1 to protest the company's attempts to reduce holiday leave loading entitlements. The company is seeking to slash the entitlement from 200 to 100 percent of a workers' salary for holiday periods. The strike will hit the company's two main refineries and its petrochemical plant in southern Kaohsiung, which employ a total of 5,000 workers.

### **South Australian teachers to strike**

Teachers in South Australia voted overwhelmingly to go on strike at the beginning of next year to oppose the state government's plans to cut \$A28 million from the education staffing budget. The budget cutback will mean 1,000 less teaching positions. A spokesman for the Australian Education Union said that strike would be indefinite unless the government 'negotiated a better deal'.

### **Textile workers locked out**

Workers employed by the Australian Dyeing Company (ADC) have been picketing the firm's premises in Melbourne after being locked out when they went on strike on December 1. The 80 workers walked off the job when the company refused to continue negotiations on a new workplace agreement.

The company has employed security guards and

installed surveillance equipment in an attempt to intimidate the picketting workers. Management lifted the lockout on Christmas Eve but immediately declared a shutdown until January 11. A spokesman for the Textile Clothing and Footwear Union said that the union was demanding payment for outstanding annual leave, sick pay and public holiday leave.

### **Maritime workers picket**

Members of the Maritime Union of Australia employed by United Constructions in the Port of Fremantle in Western Australia took strike action last week after the company reneged on a verbal agreement to pay superannuation entitlements worth \$7,000 owed to five workers.

The workers picketed the wharf and stopped the loading of a floating production and offshore storage facility destined for Singapore. Police have threatened to remove the picket and the company warned of legal action against the strikers.

### **Public sector workers strike**

Federal public sector workers are continuing industrial action to oppose the Howard government's plan to destroy up to 5,000 jobs in Centrelink, the government social services agency. Nearly 6,000 workers, members of the Community and Public Sector Union, employed at Centrelink offices in Victoria, walked off the job for half a day last week to protest the cuts. Before Christmas, 8,000 public sector workers in Canberra took strike action.

### **PNG minister announces sackings**

Workers employed by the Papua New Guinea Lands Department in Port Moresby will face substantial job losses when the government carries out its restructuring plan next year. The sackings were announced by the Minister for Lands, Viviso Seravo, at a department staff party on Christmas Eve. After acknowledging the 'commitment and dedication' of the staff, the minister said that those workers who could not be transferred to provincial positions would be retrenched.



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