

Asia and Australia

23 January 1999

Unemployed workers protest

Over 300 unemployed workers and other welfare recipients marched in Hong Kong last week to protest moves by the government to cut welfare and social security entitlements.

The proposals include forcing the unemployed to work for the dole and slashing family support payments for single parents by 20 percent. The attack on the social security entitlements comes amid growing unemployment. It rose by 0.3 percent to 5.8 percent this quarter and now stands at more than 200,000.

The cuts in single parent allowances will see monthly payments for a family of three drop from \$HK8,950 to \$HK8,010, and those for a four member family from \$11,280 to \$9,450.

Cathay Pacific flight attendants fight pay freeze

Management at Cathay Pacific airline is demanding that flight attendants, who are seeking a 3.5 percent pay increase, work an extra four hours each month. The workers received letters last week informing them that if they did not accept the company's proposal they would face a pay freeze or be forced to take redundancy.

A union spokesman said several junior flight attendants had already been called into individual meetings with management and pressured to explain why they had not returned an acceptance letter.

"People are feeling pressured. They fear their job is on the line," she said.

Despite the management's campaign of intimidation the majority of workers have rejected the company's demands. By the end of last week 3,038 workers, or over 63 percent of the workforce, had sent letters to the union refusing the offer.

More mining deaths in China

Lives are being lost on an almost daily basis in China's coal mines due to unsafe working conditions. Reports this week revealed that another nine miners were killed in two separate explosions over the past two

weeks.

The first occurred on January 14 at the Shuanghe Coal Mine, about 130 kilometres from the southwestern city of Chongqing, killing eight miners and seriously injuring three. The second explosion occurred two days later at the Magu Coal Mine outside of Shenyang in the province of Liaoning. The blast claimed the life of one worker and injured six. At least 10 other miners remain missing.

It is estimated that over 10,000 miners die in China each year due to lack of safety regulations in state-owned, private and illegal mines. China is one of the world's largest coal producers, mining 1.33 billion tonnes annually.

Vietnamese miners killed in blast

A methane gas explosion in the Moe Khe coal mine in the northern coastal province of Quang Ninh in Vietnam this week claimed the lives of 19 miners and seriously injured six.

The government authorities blamed the explosion on the extremely high temperatures and high pressure inside the mine. Methane levels were found to be up to 20 times higher than international standards. Vinacoal, the government-owned Vietnam National Coal Corporation, operates the mine.

Thai dock workers go slow

This week 6,000 Thai dock workers at Bangkok's Klong Toey Port ended a go-slow they began on January 5 after harbour officials moved to stop shipping agents paying a productivity bonus known as tea money.

The bonus system, designed to speed up the handling of cargo, has been in existence for 50 years and forms a substantial part of the workers' take home pay. Tea money per container moved ranges from Bt 120 to Bt350 and is divided among the work crews.

The port authorities are attempting to cut costs due to the decline in the number of container being handled since the onset of the economic crisis. Containers

moving through the port have fallen from 1.7 million to one million a year.

A spokesman for the workers said that a "temporary truce" had been reached after the port management suspended their action and also agreed to discuss another issue relating to overtime.

Sacked tin miners temporarily reinstated

Only 40 of the 82 tin miners retrenched last week from Murchison United's Renison Bell underground tin mine in western Tasmania will be reinstated. Under an agreement brokered by the Australian Industrial Relations Commission (IRC) between the three site unions and the company, the sacked miners will be re-employed on an interim basis whilst talks on restructuring continue.

The remaining 42 sacked contract workers remain unemployed. The unions pushed the dispute into the IRC when workers went on strike for 24 hours last week after learning of the dismissals. The miners threatened further industrial action claiming that the downsizing would compromise safety at the mine.

The sackings are part of a restructuring plan announced by Murchison United when it acquired the mine in August last year aimed at reducing the mine's 225-strong workforce. The plan also includes the introduction of four-panel roster systems and higher equipment usage that will make a section of the mining fleet and operators redundant.

While the unions claimed to be uninformed about the company's intentions a spokesman for the Australian Workers Union admitted that there had already been "initial discussions" between the union officials and management at the end of last year.

Strikers left isolated

Five members of the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union at Metalcorp Steel, near Newcastle, NSW, went on strike this week after the company broke off negotiations on a new work contract. However, 35 of the strikers' colleagues are continuing to work.

The strike erupted when the company threatened to lock out two of the workers. The union failed to call out the remaining workers and has not organised support from other sections of the union or surrounding plants to back the five strikers.

Striker David Young said that the five would only return to work if the company gave some indication it was willing to engage in "meaningful talks".

Two miners injured

Two miners suffered shocking injuries in two separate incidents in Australia's coal mines last week. On Thursday a medical crew had to remove both of the legs of a miner in order to free him after he had become trapped in a long wall conveyor at the Oak Creek coal mine in central Queensland. The miner was rushed to Rockhampton Base hospital where he was reported to be in a stable condition.

Another worker, in his early 20s, contracted by the Curragh Mine in Blackwater, Queensland had his foot severed while relocating a pit pump. The injured man was flown to Brisbane to undergo emergency surgery in an attempt to reattach his foot.



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