Asia and Australia

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Software layoffs

Mincom, Australia's largest software developer, announced this week that it would axe 110 jobs from its 1,310-strong national workforce. The decision shocked workers because the company was engaged in a campaign to recruit staff right up to December.

The company said the layoffs were part of the preparation for its initial public offer and listing on the United States Nasdaq stock exchange. It is believed that US advisers told Mincom management the company "was carrying to much fat and needed to reduce staff".

Mincom has just signed a multi-million dollar contract to install its software in Boeing manufacturing plants in the US, a $22 million agreement with Canadian Defense and a $4.6 million deal with Sasol, the South African mining and petrochemical company.

Nurses demand more staff

Nurses at Melbourne's Royal Childrens Hospital have threatened industrial action from next Monday that will close five out of six general operating theatres for two days. The hospital's two cardiac theatres will not be affected.

The nurses are protesting the severe lack of nursing staff that they say is threatening the safety of the patients and causing children to wait long periods. They are demanding the hiring of the equivalent of 10 full-time experienced nurses.

A spokesperson for the Australian Nurses Union blamed budget restrictions for staff shortage. "The dispute had been simmering for the last 12 months. While patient numbers have soared, theatre staff who resigned, went on long service leave or maternity leave were either not replaced or were replaced by casual nurses or less qualified staff."

The hospital management also refuses to use "on call staff" to replace day shift nurses when operations go into the evening because the replacement nurses would be paid for a full shift. As a result, day shift nurses are being forced to work extended hours.

One nurse said: "When you are working in a stressful environment and working excessive hours, you get tired. And that's when you make a mistake."

Industrial workers in East Java hold demonstrations

This week 500 workers from PT Tresno and PT Philip Morris Indonesia--subsidiaries of the tobacco company, PT Bentoel---held a demonstration outside the Labour Department office in Malang, East Java.

The workers are demanding a guarantee from PT Bentoel that the company will not implement restructuring plans that will lead to mass sackings. They are also seeking an improvement in their retirement package.

Workers from the jelly factory PT Surya Indoglas have also taken action. Dozens marched on the district government office in Sidoarjo, East Java, last Monday campaigning for increased pay and other benefits, including a food subsidy.

The company refused the demands, saying that the economic crisis in Indonesia has caused a delay in the growth of the company, making it harder to pay decent wages. But according to the workers, the company is still exporting large amounts of produce. Last month it shipped two tonnes to Germany and another eight tonnes to Singapore this month.

Cambodian teachers strike

School teachers across Cambodia went out on an indefinite strike on Monday to demand a substantial wage increase. Over 200 lecturers and administration staff from Phnom Penh University also took industrial action.

The teachers are paid only 60,000 riel (US$16) a month and are demanding a pay rate of at least 10 percent of the US$2,000 a month received by senior ministers and advisers. The government has refused to budge on its offer of a 20,000 riel rise.

A government spokesman said any further increase depended on a reduction in the budget allocation for

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military and security forces. While the 1999 budget cut back the allocation to the military and police, it still represented 33 percent of total government expenditure.

Many teachers are forced to seek casual work. One university teacher said she worked part-time in the office of a construction company. "I cannot depend on my government pay. It isn't enough to cover my water and electricity bills," she said. A high school teacher said: "We are on strike because we have problems filling our stomachs."

Many students are sympathetic to the teachers' action. One university student said, " I'm sorry that we don't have classes, I worry about my studies. But if our teachers don't come back we'll demonstrate against the government."

Hong Kong domestics take action again

Several hundred Filipino domestic workers held a protest in Hong Kong's central district last Sunday to oppose a proposal by Urban Councillor Jennifer Chow Kit-bing to cut their minimal wage. The proposal, if implemented by the government, would see the wages of domestics slashed from HK$3,860 per month to HK$3,088 (US$398).

The protesters carried banners reading: "We are not commodities for sale." One protestor said the wage reduction would have a terrible impact on her family in the Philippines. "The needs of our families do not decrease and the prices back home are high, inflation is high. We did not cause the crisis in Hong Kong--it was created by capitalist groups--so why pass on the burden to us?"

There are an estimated 170,000 Filipino workers in Hong Kong. Many had to pay US$2,600 to get a domestic position. Most send 80 percent of their earnings back to the Philippines to support their families. Domestics are already the lowest paid migrant workers in the country.

Korean workers oppose mergers

Workers at Daewoo Electronics factories in Kumi, Inchon and Kwangju in South Korea went on strike this week in opposition to a deal that will see the company handed over to the Samsung Group in exchange for Samsung Motors. The latest industrial action follows a two-day long strike called by unions last week.

The workers in both enterprises fear that the deal will lead to mass sackings. The 3,000 workers at Samsung Motors have been on strike since last December. At the same time, workers at LG Semiconductor, which is scheduled to merge with Hyundai Electronics, are carrying out a go-slow that has effectively reduced production by more than 50 percent.

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