

Asia, the Pacific and Australasia

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South Korean workers protest against layoffs

Workers in 18 cities across South Korea staged rallies last weekend to demand an end to corporate restructuring and escalating layoffs. About 10,000 workers and students gathered in front of Seoul's Yongsan Station on Saturday waving red flags and chanting "Stop mass layoffs" and "Reduce working hours".

The rally heard that the Seoul Metropolitan Subway Corporation intended to slash 2,078 jobs from its 11,492 strong workforce. Addressing the rally, the head of the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions Lee Kap-young said the organisation would call nationwide strike action by its half million members on May Day if the Kim Dae Jung government did not agree to union demands.

A speaker for the Federation of Korean Trade Unions, the peak union body formerly backed by the previous military regime, told the rally FKTU would quit the government's tripartite committee on economic restructuring if the government did not accept the federation's six-point plan, including a job sharing scheme and full pay for union job representatives. He said the unions were not "opposed to restructuring per-se but to the government's and managements' unilateral layoffs".

The government is planning to step up repressive measures against workers who take industrial action. An inter-ministerial meeting of public security officials held this week reaffirmed an earlier decision to crack down on so-called illegal strikes and demonstrations and to "harshly punish those who lead them".

After the meeting a government prosecutor said: "Strengthened crackdowns on illegal group actions have become inevitable to establish the dignity of the state."

Meanwhile, the Education Minister announced the elimination of 1,276 teaching positions from the country's middle and high schools this year. The job cuts include 102 school principals and 330 deputy principals. The plan will reduce the number of nationwide teaching positions to 263,636.

Chinese miners injured in clash with police

Ten coal miners were injured and five arrested in clashes with police during a demonstration on March 15 outside the Chengdu government offices in the province of Sichuan. The

miners were from the state-owned Dujiang colliery, located 50 kilometres northeast of Chengdu. The mine is facing bankruptcy as a result of a financial crisis and an explosion last May that caused the deaths of 23 workers.

About 3,000 miners face unemployment and have begun protesting over the embezzlement by government officials of about \$US4.3 million in state funds set aside for redundancy payments. Workers with 20 years on the job will now only receive \$1,300 in compensation. Many workers have not received any payment for the last three months.

About 200 Dujiang miners began a round-the-clock demonstration outside the Chengdu government offices on March 12. The clashes broke out on the fourth day after police demanded that the protesting workers move their picket.

6,000 Sri Lankan health workers strike

Striking employees of the Sri Lankan public health sector rallied in Vihara Maha Devi Park and picketed at Lipton Square before marching two kilometres to the Health Ministry in the heart of Colombo on March 26.

More than 1,000 Colombo National Hospital workers demonstrated around the hospital for several hours after the meeting in front of the ministry. Thousands of health sector workers from different parts of the country joined the picket and demonstration.

Their demands include an immediate wage increase, removal of cuts imposed on overtime payments, job security for temporary workers and improved working conditions.

The action was called by the federation of the health sector unions. The United Health Workers Union, which is affiliated to the Socialist Equality Party of Sri Lanka, played an active role in leading the striking workers. When the United Health Workers Union secretary, Ajitha Gunaratna, a member of the SEP, rose to speak at the meeting, other union officials unsuccessfully attempted to prevent him. Workers vehemently demanded that Gunaratna be given the right to speak. The SEP has now planned its own public meeting of health sector workers and others on April 5.

3,000 workers on strike at Sri Lankan tea estate

More than 3,000 workers at Hunnasingiriya tea plantation started a strike after two night watchers of the estate were assaulted by the estate's Assistant Superintendent. He wanted to drive into the estate on April 26 at 10.45 pm, despite a rule that no vehicle can enter the estate after 6 pm. When the night watchers blocked him, he assaulted them on the spot.

Once the word spread, 3,000 workers of four divisions of the estate started an immediate strike. Some machines were stopped half way.

As the workers belong to the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) which is led by a government minister, Saumyamurthi Thondaman, CWC leaders are working towards a negotiated settlement. If no agreement is struck before April 6, estate workers across the whole Matale District, where Hunnasgiriya tea plantation is situated, have threatened to begin an indefinite strike.

Cathay Pacific deadline extended

Hong Kong-based airline Cathay Pacific has extended a deadline it gave to its pilots last month demanding that they accept pay cuts of up to 27 percent in exchange for stock options or face redundancies.

The company moved the deadline from April 6 to April 30 after the pilots overwhelmingly rejected the company's proposal. The leaders of the pilots union, who are in talks with the company and desperate to avert industrial action, accepted the new deadline.

Cathay last month reported its first full-year loss in 35 years, posting a net loss of \$542 million.

Public sector jobs slashed in Indonesia

A government spokesman announced last week that over 15,000 workers will be laid off from Indonesia's 10 strategic state industries this year, cutting the overall workforce by 31.9 percent, from 47,000 to 32,000.

The industries targeted include the Nusantara Aircraft Industry, shipbuilder PT PAL, railway carriage maker PT INKA, steel product manufacturers PT Bharata Indonesia and PT Boma Bisma Indra, and steel producer PT Krakatau.

The Nusantara Aircraft Industry, the largest of the 10 industries, plans to slash 6,000 from its 16,000-strong workforce by enforcing "early retirements".

Fiji aviation workers threaten strikes

Staff at Fiji's Civil Aviation Authority have threatened to stage lightning strikes if the authority refuses to withdraw a restructuring program that will result in significant job losses. More than 500 workers endorsed the strike plan this week after the management issued a circular informing employees of the terms of a voluntary redundancy.

Fiji Public Services Association general secretary Mahendra Chaudhry said workers believed that the "time was ripe for industrial action to stop public sector reforms... Hundreds of jobs are on the line and unemployment is a chronic problem in this country."

Industrial action threatened at PNG airport

Papua New Guinea air traffic controllers at the Jackson Airport Control Centre in Port Moresby threatened a walkout this week. The 80 workers, members of the Air Traffic Controllers Association, have been locked in a dispute with the Office of Civil Aviation over the provision of fuel for vehicles used by shift workers to get home.

For the past two weeks the workers have had to pay for fuel out of their own pockets after the authority refused to allocate funds. A spokesman for the air traffic controllers said: "the catch-phrase that 'there is no money for fuel' can no longer be tolerated."

The workers have resolved to impose a work-to-rule if the fuel issue is not quickly resolved.

Waterfront workers stood down

Patrick Stevedoring stood down its seven-man workforce in the port of Newcastle last week after the workers defied a Federal Court order to unload the Western Condor docked at the Toll Holdings facility.

Members of the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) walked off the job over a safety issue claiming that a locked access gate prevented workers from leaving the site in the case of an emergency. The afternoon shift workers also refused to work after Patrick Stevedoring, the company sub-contracted to unload ships at the Toll facility, said it would not pay the morning shift crew.

The latest clash is part of an ongoing dispute between Toll and maritime union that first erupted last September when the company gave the Transport Workers Union sole coverage of its workforce, including workers performing dockside work such as fork lift driving. MUA members have traditionally performed this work.

The company has threatened to close down its \$30 million Newcastle cargo and distribution operation rather than employ MUA labour.

Australian miners oppose company agreement

Miners at Rio Tinto's Hunter Valley No 1 open cut mine in the New South Wales northern coal fields last week rejected non-union individual work agreements drawn by the company. They voted 2 to 1 against the proposal in a secret ballot organised by the Australian Electoral Commission. The commission announced that 122 opposed the agreement while 64 supported it.

The mine was the site of a protracted strike last year against the introduction of individual work contracts, job losses and sweeping changes in work practices. Despite the determination of the strikers, the union ended the strike, accepting the sacking of nearly half of the workforce. Almost every union delegate at the mine was dismissed in the downsizing.



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