

Asia, Australia and the Pacific

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Thai power workers denounce sell off

Over 2,000 power workers from the state-owned Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand (EGAT) staged a noisy protest outside the Authority's head office in Nonthaburi earlier this week. The demonstration included 500 workers from the Mae Moh power plant in Lampang and another 400 from the Bang Pakong power station.

The action was called in opposition to the government's decision to privatise 42.5 percent of the 3,645-megawatt Ratchaburi Power plant, currently under construction in Western Thailand, for in excess of \$US1.52 billion.

Addressing the rally, a union representative said the Ratchaburi plant would be the most important in the country. "If the private sector is allowed to run the plant, it can manipulate power prices and the public will be greatly affected," he said.

The union was not attempting to "oust the government," he said. Feelings are running high among rank-and-file workers, however. One worker said: "Any private company wishing to run a power plant should build one. If the government sells this plant it will live to regret it."

Public housing staff oppose privatisation

More than 5,000 workers employed by Hong Kong's Housing Department staged a protest last weekend against plans to privatise public housing and to contract out the management of housing estates.

The new Tenants Purchase Scheme will allow the department to sell off over two-thirds of the city's public housing by the year 2003. Private companies are already providing technicians, caretakers and other services on many estates.

The Alliance of Housing Department Staff Unions called on the government to shelve the outsourcing

proposals for at least two years. The union said more than 4,000 of the 9,000 department's workers would lose their jobs if contracting out continued.

Even so, the union is considering a proposal made by department officials that retrenched workers set up their own companies and compete for work contracts.

Thai golf caddies continue their fight

Fifty golf caddies, sacked five months ago by the State Rail of Thailand (SRT), have resumed their occupation of the closed Chantuchak Golf Club. On Sunday, the caddies blocked city officials, accompanied by 150 police, from entering the club grounds.

The workers were dismissed after the SRT sold the golf course to the Bangkok Municipal Council. Even though the caddies have received a 40,000 baht redundancy payment they are insisting on the reinstatement of 12 rail workers who were sacked for supporting a blockade of train tracks staged by the retrenched golf course workers.

Officials of the Railway Employees Association, the union covering the sacked workers, refused to defend the victimised rail workers.

Another 32 die in China's mines

Hundreds of miners continue to perish in the notoriously unsafe working conditions of China's coal mining industry. This week, a report emerged that 32 miners were drowned last month when working parallel shifts in the Duguilin and Sunyuming mines in Ci county, near Handan City in the Hebei province.

The workers died under an avalanche of water that burst in from a breach in a nearby reservoir and flooded the shafts that connected the two mines.

City inspectors had recently ordered the mines shut after observing that water from the reservoir had begun to seep in. County officials ignored the direction and the miners were sent back to work. The same county officials are opposing any investigation into the disaster and are claiming that no one was killed.

Indian newspaper workers support national strike

Newspaper workers and journalists in West Bengal held a protest rally this week and voted to support a national 24-hour strike called by the All Indian Newspaper Employees Federation.

The workers fear that the government's Wage Board, formed last September to assess wages in the industry, has brought down a working paper that is totally detrimental to their interests. The Board has refused to release its report, completed on April 6.

Wollongong academics strike

Academic staff at Wollongong University went on strike for 24 hours this week, forcing the cancellation of most classes.

Strikers maintained a day-long picket outside the university's administration building, displaying placards demanding a 19 percent pay increase without trade offs.

A local spokesman for the National Tertiary Education Union said the union's claim was negotiable but the university management had offered a pay increase of "zero percent and they're saying that's not negotiable. The strike is not about the amount of the pay increase but the management's attitude in negotiations."

Academics at Sydney University and the University of New South Wales are also campaigning for pay increases but the union has not organised joint industrial action

Hunter Valley meatworkers file for unfair dismissal

Over 400 workers sacked last week from the Aberdeen Meatworks in the Upper Hunter Valley will lodge an unfair dismissal action with the Industrial Relations Commission.

A union spokesman said management had breached a standing agreement when it failed to give at least one week's notice of its intention to dismiss the workforce. Six weeks ago the company stood down the workers claiming there was a shortage of stock to slaughter. The union is claiming payment for the six-week period and said it has not ruled out industrial action.

Another strike at Esso's Longford plant

Workers employed by contractors to carry out repairs at Esso's Longford gas and oil refinery went on strike last Monday following a breakdown in negotiations over redundancy packages.

The workers are employed repairing the refinery that was severely damaged last September by a massive

explosion which ripped through the plant, killing two workers and leaving the state of Victoria without gas for two weeks.

Last week 70 technicians went on strike for 48 hours in response to "expert" evidence presented by Esso to the Royal Commission into the explosion, blaming worker error for the disaster.

Hospital staff extend strike

Hospital staff at Canberra Hospital this week decided to strike indefinitely against attempts by management to implement changes to working conditions, including multi-skilling, that will lead to job losses and increased workloads.

Wardsmen and hospital assistants stopped work on Monday for what was intended to be a three-hour protest but decided to continue to strike when the management announced that it would not back away from its plan.

A union spokesperson said strike action was likely to be ongoing unless management decided to consult the union about the changes.



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