

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

13 November 1999

## South Korean workers oppose power sell-off

Thousands of members of the Korean National Electrical Workers' Union (KNEWU) have voted to launch a national strike at the end of the month if the government refuses to drop its restructuring plans for the state-run Korea Electric Power Corp. (KEPCO).

Early this year, the government announced its restructuring plan for KEPCO which includes reconstituting the company's power generation as six separate subsidiaries. At least one of the newly formed subsidiaries will be sold off by the end of this year.

This week 61 out of the 65 local chapters of the KNEWU met and overwhelmingly endorsed the national strike proposal. Workers from the Korea Power Engineering Co, KEPCO Nuclear Fuel Co and the Korea Atomic Energy Research Institute also voted to join the strike.

Work stoppages and rallies are also planned for mid-November. Earlier this week hundreds of workers belonging to the Federation of Korean Trade Unions and the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions, the country's two peak union bodies, joined state power workers in a rally outside the National Assembly building.

## Police in the Philippines attack workers

Policemen armed with batons and metal shields viciously attacked workers demonstrating for wage increases in Manila on Monday injuring at least ten. Scores of workers from the Alliance of Filipino Workers were attempting to get through a cordon of riot police to gain entry into the House of Representatives compound when the attack took place.

Witnesses said the police suddenly began hitting protesters with batons and violently shoved them with shields. One protester was kicked and belted by several baton-wielding officers. The workers retaliated with rocks and wooden sticks after the police began using a water cannon.

The Alliance workers were among about 1,000 protesters from different labor groups who were demonstrating for a daily wage increase of between 125 and 165 pesos (\$US3.13 to \$US4.12). Last month the Regional Wages Board awarded a national pay increase of only 25.50 pesos (\$US0.64) bringing the minimum daily wage to just 198 pesos (\$4.95).

Union representatives sit on the tripartite Regional Wage Board, along with government officials and the employers.

## Indonesian workers protest for union rights

Workers belonging to KOBAR, a factory-level trade union with members in six industrial sectors, are planning a march on the Department of Labour Power building in Jakarta next week to protest the refusal of the government to recognise the union. KOBAR is an affiliate of the National Front for Indonesian Workers' Struggle.

KOBAR submitted an application to the Department at the end of September seeking recognition but was refused under the provisions of a new law that came into effect on the same day. A union spokesman said that KOBAR was denied any information regarding the content of the new legislation.

"The Suharto-era labour laws are still in effect, despite the regime's new face, and companies in Indonesia still have the right to hand pick the leadership of worker's organisations at the factory level," he said.

## Unemployed workers protests

Chinese riot police attacked demonstrating textile workers this week, injuring six women at Weinan, Shaanxi province. Police dragged the women along the ground by the hair and then flung them into a ditch, causing one of them to suffer a broken arm.

The 1,000 workers had blocked three roads into the city for four days in protest against corrupt government practices, which they blame for the destruction of 4,000 jobs and closure of their factory last year. They were also demanding a rise in unemployment benefits, which are currently only 100 yuan (\$HK93) a month.

The provincial government sold the textile plant for 40 million yuan despite the fact that it had fixed assets worth more than 200 million yuan. Many government officials have enriched themselves by buying up closed state enterprises at bargain basement prices.

## Anchor milk powder workers' struggle sold out

The Ceylon Mercantile and Industrial Workers Union has called off a protracted strike by 150 workers at the Anchor milk powder factory in Biyagama, Colombo, in Sri Lanka.

The workers went on strike in mid-September after the management refused to recognise the newly formed union branch and began to victimise union activists in the plant. The strikers were also seeking a 40 percent pay rise and an increase in other entitlements.

The union ordered a return to work even though none of its demands had been met and 27 workers, accused by the management of organising the strike, have been barred from entering the factory. Another worker has been framed-up and is facing charges of damaging the manager's car.

#### **Jaffna municipal workers decide to strike**

Sanitary workers employed by the Jaffna Municipal Council, in Sri Lanka, announced this week that they will go on strike for improved working conditions. The workers complain that the Council refuses to provide basic hygiene and safety items, such a soap and protective gloves.

They are also protesting against the Council's harsh disciplinary measures, including the arbitrary imposition of 5-day suspensions for absenteeism. The Jaffna Municipal Council is controlled by the Tamil United Liberation Front, a Tamil bourgeois party.

#### **Sri Lankan government orders the sacking of old workers**

Many older workers at the Welisara depot of the government Co-operative Wholesale Establishment have been retrenched following a direction issued by the Trade Minister last month. The workers have been employed at the depot, which is on the outskirts of Colombo, for between 20 to 30 years on a casual basis and are not entitled to pensions or gratuity payments.

The directive required depot managers to acquire birth certificates from casual workers to check if they were born before October 1939. Managers, who failed to carry out the investigation properly, were threatened with salary cuts.

The hundreds of casual workers, who are employed by CWE to store, pack and sell the scores of products handled by the company, are paid about US\$1.50 per day. The workers are members of a union but it has not organised any struggle to defend their jobs.

#### **Steel workers walk out over sacking**

Steelworkers at BHP's Port Kembla steel plant on the New South Wales South Coast have been on strike for two days in opposition to the sacking of an electrician with 27 years service at the mill. The management bypassed established disciplinary procedure, which includes official warnings, counseling or suspension before dismissal, and instantly dismissed the worker when he failed to isolate electrical equipment before proceeding with a job.

Work in at least seven departments in the steelworks came to a standstill as hundreds of maintenance and production workers walked off the job.

The strike involves workers from the Tin Mill, which BHP plans to sell-off as part of its current restructuring program, and the Plate Mill, which is slated for closure. Slab Yard personnel have also been on strike for four days over a manning issue.

#### **Teachers vote for further strike action**

State school teachers in New South Wales stopped work for three hours on Friday and voted for a 24-hour strike next week to demand that the Labor government increase its wage offer. The stoppage went ahead in defiance of an Industrial Relations

Commission recommendation that the teachers cease all further industrial action.

The State Labor government has only offered a 2 percent per year pay increase for the next five years and demanded increased teaching hours and a reduction in annual holiday entitlements.

The Teachers Federation has called on the government to withdraw the wage proposal presently before the IRC and begin direct negotiations with the union. While the previous award agreement expired in June there have been no direct negotiations between the teachers' union and education department.

#### **Cleaners strike over speed-up**

Cleaners at Menzies Property Services in New South Wales will strike for three days next week over attempts by the company to speed-up work times. The new cleaning schedules are set to begin from mid-November. Under the new arrangements a small team will be expected to clean a large classroom in just six minutes.

The speed-up is being demanded by the State Labor government in an attempt to cut costs. A spokesman for the workers said: "The government is seriously out of touch if they think six minutes is enough time to clean a classroom that holds 30 children."

#### **New Zealand nurses union calls of protests**

The union representing nurses employed by Wairarapa Health in New Zealand has decided to call off a dispute over inadequate staffing. Despite the union decision the nurses went ahead with strike action on Thursday forcing the cancellation of surgery at the Wairarapa Hospital and the closure of services at day clinics.

A union spokesman said that the 120 nurses had decided to accept Wairarapa Health management's settlement proposal but went ahead with the strike because they were, "still cynical about the employer's offer to address staffing issues and believe that nothing is guaranteed."



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