

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

27 November 1999

South Korean workers stage protest

More than 30,000 workers marched through Seoul last week against the government's plans to restructure the public sector and to sell off part of the state-run Korea Electric Power Corporation. The workers are also demanding changes to the law that prohibits companies maintaining union officials on their payroll.

The Federation of Korean Trade Unions (FKTU), South Korea's largest peak union body, organised the march. A union spokesman said that unless the demands were met, the FKTU would withdraw from the labour-management-government tripartite committee and hold rallies and strikes at the end of the month. He also threatened that the union "might carry out a defeat campaign for the ruling party" in the forthcoming elections.

The FKTU has sat on the tripartite committee since its inception and has worked alongside government and employer representatives to oversee the destruction of thousands of jobs and working conditions.

Police attack Chinese workers' protest

On November 25, more than 50 police officers launched an attack on 400 workers who were protesting against the closure of the state-owned Xian Electric Stove Factory in the northern Chinese city of Xian. At least five people were injured in the assault.

The government announced earlier that it had decided to shut down the plant and move the operations to another location. However, a new factory had not been constructed. The workers fear that they will not be rehired and claim that the management closed the plant so that they could sell the land for personal profit.

Thousands of Jakarta poor join protest

Over 10,000 poor people rallied in a Jakarta sports stadium this week to protest over government decisions to ban pedicabs from operating in the city and to enforce strict measures to control street vendors.

Thousands arrived at the stadium on rented buses and trucks but hundreds of others had already spent the evening there. Over 1,000 pedicab drivers came to the demonstration with their vehicles decorated with slogans denouncing the government's plan.

Earlier, Jakarta's governor ordered police raids against

pedicab drivers in the city's five mayoral districts to drive them off the streets. The country's newly elected President Abdurrahman Wahid defended the governor's decision and the raids as a "humanitarian act" and as "a measure to eradicate poverty". "We cannot let becak (pedicab) drivers continue their operations here as they've been working like horses," he said.

He admitted that there have been "procedural violations" by the city officials directing the raids but insisted the operation was "positive for both the drivers and the administration".

One driver named Sarnap condemned the President's statement saying: "What can we do then? Driving a becak is the only thing we can do for a living. We have no training for anything else and there is no alternate work".

Workers strike for better pay

Workers at the Cooperative Wholesale Establishment store in Welisara, a suburb near Colombo, went on strike last week in support of a pay increase. The workers are seeking a daily pay rate of 150 rupees (\$US2) for a male worker and 125 rupees for a female worker. Currently workers are paid 104 rupees a day. Their other demands include overtime to be paid at time and half, payment of twice the normal rate for working on public holidays and employer contributions to a provident fund.

The management promised to increase wages by 25 percent in the wake of the strike but workers say that they have little confidence this pledge will be honoured.

Textile workers face job losses

Textile workers at the Vetex factory in Veyangoda, about 32 km from Colombo, are worried that they will again lose their jobs. Last January the management closed down the factory when workers launched a campaign against cuts to their annual bonus. For six months following the closure the workers received only 4,000 rupees a month in compensation.

The factory has now been reopened under the control of the People's Bank. Vetex owes the bank money and the workers believe that once the debt is worked off it will close the plant down. One worker said: "This factory has closed again and again in last few years, but next time will be the last one".

Garment workers fight victimisation

Twenty-two workers at the I & A Lanka garment factory in Kalutara, south of Colombo, who were suspended at the start of November for their involvement in a union campaign, have still not been re-employed.

The workers were fighting for the provision of transport, especially for female workers employed on the night shift. Following their suspensions, the entire workforce went on strike to demand their reinstatement and the removal of a production manager. When the management agreed to the demands the strike was called off. The workers went out again after only four days when they found out that the production manager had been retained.

The company has again agreed to get rid of the production manager, but has now refused to reemploy the suspended workers. The union has signed an agreement accepting the management's terms.

Workers suffer food poisoning

About 100 workers employed at the AJS garment factory in the Katunayaka Free Trade Zone, about 20 km from Colombo, suffered food poisoning last week after getting their lunch from a restaurant close to the plant. Some suffered extremely bad diarrhea and had to be hospitalised.

Although the quality of the restaurant's food is known to be poor, the workers are forced to buy it because they are restricted to half hour lunch breaks and there are no facilities in the plant to prepare food.

The workers are paid about \$US43 a month and work 12 hours each day. They are entitled to a monthly \$US4 attendance bonus but the management always finds reasons not to pay it. In 1997 the company cut the annual bonus and increased work targets.

Indian doctors strike paralyses hospitals

Nearly 4,000 resident doctors and about 1,000 interns working in 50 municipal hospitals in the Maharashtra region went on an indefinite strike this week to press the government for a pay increase.

The members of the Maharashtra Association of Doctors are demanding a 60 percent rise to bring their wages into line with doctors and interns in other regions, who are paid between 8,000 rupees and 16,800 rupees (\$US200 to \$360) a month. They are also protesting against the extremely high fees charged for medical education in Maharashtra.

The State government offered a 1,000 rupee increase and said that the door was open for further negotiations in March next year. However, a government spokesman has already ruled out any further pay rises, claiming that the state is facing "a bad financial situation".

Workers strike over safety

Work on the reconstruction of the North Sydney Olympic pool came to halt this week when construction workers walked off the job over safety concerns. The strike was called after a 37-year-old worker fell five metres and suffered chest, leg and head injuries.

A union safety officer said: "It is one of the most disgraceful sites I have seen as far as safety. You cannot find an area that complies with the WorkCover regulations of New South Wales or the Australian standards". The workers say they intend to

continue to strike until a thorough safety investigation of the site has been carried out.

Catholic teachers stop work

Catholic school teachers in NSW went on strike for half a day this week in support of a 4.5 percent pay increase. Teachers from the Sydney suburbs of Leichardt, Parramatta and Waitara held a rally on Wednesday before marching to the local Catholic Education Office. Earlier they endorsed a recommendation imposing bans on all meetings before and after school until "all outstanding matters and the pay issue is resolved".

The strikes followed a series of two-hour rolling stoppages by public school teachers earlier in the week to demand that the state Labor government increase its pay offer. The teachers are seeking an increase of 7.5 percent but the government has agreed to pay only 2 percent annually over the next five years. It has also demanded a widening of teaching hours and a reduction in annual holiday entitlements.

The rolling stoppages are set to continue until next week. The state teacher's dispute is presently before the Industrial Relations Commission.

Airline refuses to reinstate sacked engineers

The management of Air Niugini, Papua New Guinea's national airline, will appeal a directive issued by the Arbitration Tribunal last week ordering the company to reinstate 38 aircraft engineers. The engineers were dismissed after they took industrial action in support of a five percent wage claim.

Even though the Tribunal criticised the company and ordered the reinstatement it also found that the engineers sit-in "was out of line in settling an industrial dispute" because no secret ballot had been conducted before the strike. The findings left the way open for Air Niugini to refuse to rehire the sacked workers and to appeal the decision.



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