

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

11 December 1999

## **Korean unionists injured in police attack**

On Tuesday evening, hundreds of South Korean riot police attacked and broke up a sit-in being staged by leaders and members of the Korea Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) outside the National Assembly building.

In the course of the assault, a number of KCTU officials and union members were beaten and badly injured. The organisation's general secretary, Lee Soo-Ho, suffered damage to the ligaments in his left knee when he was violently dragged out of the cargo container that was being used as the sit-in office.

Jang Kwang-Su, the General Secretary of Korean Federation of Construction Daily Workers Unions, was savagely beaten on his hands with batons, resulting in fractures to several of his fingers. Another union official was trampled and then struck about his neck, shoulders and back before being dumped head-first into an arrest vehicle. Over 20 union activists were arrested.

The sit-in, that was due to continue until December 18, was launched as part of a campaign to press the government to concede a raft of demands, including the reduction of working hours, the abolition of the National Security Law and the enactment of a Human Right Act.

The unionists were also demanding that the government abandon its plan to sell off sections of the power industry and drop moves to privatise some of the country's state hospitals. The peak union body was also planning two weeks of demonstration and rallies. The KCTU central committee has called on its members to stage sit-ins at their work places to protest the police raid.

## **Retired Chinese workers demonstrate against pension cuts**

According to a Hong Kong based human rights organisation, up to 2,000 retired steel workers have engaged in two days of demonstrations this week in the city of Chongqing in China's Sichuan province, protesting against a massive cut in their company-paid pension. The pensions have been reduced from 300 yuan (\$US36) per month to 200 yuan.

The retirees had worked for the Chongqing Special Steel Factory, a state-owned enterprise (SOE) that currently employs over 18,000 workers. The pension cut is one of a series of measures being carried out by the company to meet government dictates that SOE's become profitable or close down.

On Wednesday, the workers blocked a major highway leading into Chongqing until late in the evening. On Thursday morning they assembled at the gates of the factory, until police dispersed them. Still defiant, the retirees returned to the highway and resumed a blockade.

The Information Centre of Human Rights and Democratic Movement in China estimates that at least 60,000 protests, most involving industrial workers, have taken place this year.

## **Police attack Chinese silk factory workers**

Over 200 police attacked 1,000 workers from the Hongjiang Silk Factory, who had blocked a main highway for two days last week to protest against the closure of their factory in Sichuan province. Five of the protestors were injured and three arrested when they resisted the attack

and threw stones at the police.

The workers, who have not been paid for one year, staged the action after learning that the state-owned enterprise was to be declared bankrupt and closed down. During the protest, workers displayed banners reading "We want to eat" and "Our children want to go to school".

A spokesman for the company announced: "We are shutting down the factory because it is a money loser. The more it produces, the more deficit it creates." However, workers blamed corruption by government officials and mismanagement for the factory's problems.

The silk factory is just one of the thousands of state-owed enterprises throughout the country that are being bankrupted as part of the government's "economic reform" program. Many have been closed without outstanding wages, pensions or other entitlements being paid.

## **Chinese students support teachers strike**

Teachers at the Guangzhou South Chinese and English School ended a two-day strike on December 2 after the school's management agreed to sign employment contracts guaranteeing a number of conditions, including regular paid holidays and penalty payments for working overtime.

The teachers will also be paid a 300 yuan (\$US36) pay increase and their professional certificates, which had been confiscated by the management to prevent them leaving to find other work, will be returned.

The school is one of dozens of private institutions that have sprung up in Guangzhou providing for students from predominantly wealthy families. While more than 1,000 students pay over 30,000 yuan each a year to attend the school, the teachers' wages are just 1,000 yuan a month.

During the strike the management sealed off the school, cut off telephone links and locked pupils in their dormitories in a bid to turn them against the teachers. However, when two busloads of replacement teachers arrived to take over the strikers' positions, the students surrounded the vehicles and prevented them from alighting.

Teachers say they are confident that the management will not be able to renege on the agreement. "The year-end holidays are coming on and the mid-term examinations are approaching. There will be chaos when the students return if the school officials fail to keep their word," one teacher said.

## **Health workers stage hunger strike in Sri Lanka**

Twenty substitute health workers, attached to the Puttlam and Chilaw hospitals in Sri Lanka's north western province, went on a two-day hunger strike on December 2 seeking permanency of employment. They ended their action only after the provincial health minister promised to act on their demands.

The workers launched their strike after the government issued a circular claiming that it was prepared to offer permanency to substitute workers who had completed 80 days of service. Many of the substitute workers had previously been employed as seasonal workers for the government's Anti-Malaria Campaign, but in 1994-95 they were recruited to the provincial hospitals.

However, when they applied at the beginning of this month to be made

permanent they were informed by government officials that the quota of intakes for the hospitals under the provincial health ministry had already been filled.

The substitute workers had engaged in a similar agitation five years ago, but only a few were made permanent. A spokesman said that they suffered substandard working conditions and were not issued with uniforms or any protective clothing. They were also deprived of the limited allowances enjoyed by permanent workers, such as double payment for working on public holidays and overtime payments. They receive a daily wage of just 140 rupees (US\$2).

#### **Sri Lankan nurses and midwives strike for back-pay**

Nurses and midwives attached to public hospitals in the Ampara district in eastern Sri Lanka went on strike on Monday. The health workers are demanding the payment of overtime allowances due to them since last February. A spokesman for the Public Service United Nurses Union said the action would continue until the demand was met.

#### **Indian doctors end strike**

A 14-day strike by some 5,000 resident doctors in Maharashtra was called off on December 5 by the Maharashtra Association of Resident Doctors (MARD), after the government terminated the services of 476 doctors and threatened to expel medical students from state hostels. The doctors were demanding a pay increase of 500 to 800 rupees a month, to bring their wage rates into line with resident doctors in other parts of the country. At present the doctors receive 5,000 rupees (\$18) a month.

The junior doctors, who are enrolled for a three-year postgraduate medical degree, are required to work as resident doctors during their training. One doctor said: "The government does not want to pay for intellectual labour. We are working almost like slaves."

Maharashtra's 24 public hospitals treat 2,000 patients per day and thousands more are treated in out-patients clinics.

#### **Bangladeshi power workers fight privatisation**

Troops were deployed on Tuesday to guard Bangladesh's 18 power stations, after technicians walked off the job for three days in protest at the government's "energy sector reform program". The program includes the privatisation of the 750-megawatt Ashuganj power plant.

While the stoppage did not affect power supplies, one senior official from the Power Development Board admitted that widespread blackouts could have occurred if any of the plants had gone out of operation due to mechanical disorder.

For some time major financial institutions, including the Manila-based Asian Development Bank, have been pressing the government to corporatise the power industry.

#### **Four Pakistani shipbreaking workers killed**

Four workers lost their lives in the Gaddani shipbreaking yard in Pakistan's southwest province of Baluchistan this week, when a fire broke out inside the vessel they were working on. The four were trampled on and burnt to death when workers panicked and rushed to escape the flames. The conditions in the country's shipbreaking industry are currently the subject of an investigation by the International Metalworkers Federation (IMF). A team from the federation was visiting other shipbreaking sites at the time of the accident.

#### **Australian air safety technicians fight job cuts**

Technical and maintenance staff held two-hour meetings at airports around Australia last Wednesday to protest against a proposed 18 percent staff cut by Airservices Australia.

There have already been 4,000 jobs destroyed in the past nine years. About 400 were axed after 1995 when Airservices Australia was created by restructuring the old Civil Aviation Safety Authority.

The workers warned that staff reductions are already undermining safety, because vital inspections of the equipment at airports cannot be carried out. On the Saturday before the work stoppage, the new PABX system at Sydney airport went down for nearly one hour, cutting off all

communications with the airport's emergency fire crews.

The reliability of airport telephone systems is one of the problems that the Airservices workers have been concerned about since the job of servicing the systems was outsourced to a private company last September.

A union spokesman said that internal and external lines to the airport's offices, including to the fire station manager and the fire control centres, were all affected by the breakdown.

"It is of particular concern for an emergency service not to have any communications outward or between each station. This is not acceptable and requires an investigation as to why this has occurred and still not been fully rectified," he said.

#### **Australian miners strike over cuts**

Around 160 mineworkers from Coal and Allied's Howick mine near Singleton in New South Wales ended their three-day strike and returned to work on Wednesday. The workers walked off the job on Monday for the second time in one month when negotiations over a new work agreement broke down. The workers rejected the terms of an agreement that includes significant changes to current work practices and working conditions.

#### **Airport workers end strike action in New Caledonia**

Members of the Union des Syndicats des Travailleurs Kanak Exploités (USRKE) working at the Tontouta International Airport in Noumea, New Caledonia, ended a week of industrial action on Tuesday. The workers, who are employed by Tontouta Air Services (TAS), the company which manages the airport, launched a series of rolling strikes to protest the dismissal of one of their colleagues.

The action disrupted international flights as workers in TAS's luggage, check-in and catering services walked off the job. The USTKE's Secretary-General Gérard Jodar called off the strike after the company agreed to reinstate the worker.

#### **New Zealand tax workers push for new contract**

Workers in New Zealand's Inland Revenue Department (IRD) stopped work across the country and attended lunchtime rallies this week to discuss their campaign to win a new collective work contract.

The workers are angry that the IRD management has stalled the negotiations, forcing them to remain on a contract that expired more than 18 months ago.

A spokesman for the Public Service Association expressed concerns that a further delay could result in more industrial action. "We have continued talking with the IRD but given how far apart we are, this alone is not enough to placate our members."



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