

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

22 July 2000

Textile workers blockade Chinese uniform factory

More than 1,000 workers and retirees continued this week to blockade a uniform factory in the southwestern city of Chengdu, in Sichuan province, in protest against the possible closure of the plant. Many of the protesters are retired workers who depend on company-paid pensions.

The 3508 Military Industry factory produces military clothing for the Peoples Liberation Army (PLA) and employs over 5,000 workers. It is believed to be on the verge of bankruptcy. In order to raise funds, factory officials had begun speculating on real estate investments and selling company property, but ended up with heavy losses. The protest is the latest sign of unrest over the closure, bankruptcy or privatisation of state-owned enterprises in China.

Chinese riot police attack teachers

Last week thousands of teachers in Yushu city in the northeastern Chinese province of Jilin were prevented by police from travelling to Changchun, the provincial capital, to protest their mass dismissal. On the grounds of weeding out incompetent and unqualified staff, every teacher in the city was dismissed by the municipal authorities and ordered to reapply for their positions. The teachers were hoping to present a petition against the action.

Various clashes took place as police forced teachers off trains and buses. The most severe incident took place at Yushu train station. At least 10 teachers suffered injuries when riot police stormed a Changchun-bound train after teachers on board refused to disembark.

Hong Kong teachers hold protest march

Over 6,000 teachers in Hong Kong marched to the government headquarters last weekend as part of a long running dispute against a proposed benchmark test for language teachers. Delegates presented a petition signed by 37,000 teachers who oppose the Education and Manpower Bureau's decision to hold the tests in October

this year. The teachers fear that the tests, involving 14,000 English teachers and 4,300 Putonghua teachers, will be a means for cutting jobs.

Indian power workers to strike against privatisation plans

Power workers from 13 unions at the Maharashtra State Electricity Board (MSEB) in Mumbai have voted to go on an indefinite strike on Tuesday. The action is against the state government's decision to privatise the board. Power workers from nine districts in Varanasi will also meet next week to organise a campaign against the privatisation of the power industry in Uttar Pradesh.

The recent privatisation of the electricity boards in Orissa and Andhra Pradesh led to job losses and steep increases in electricity charges and workers fear similar developments in other regions. The IMF and World Bank are pressing national and state governments to push ahead with the privatisation of the power industry leading to huge job losses.

Weavers from Surat vote for indefinite strike

Weavers in the Indian city of Surat will begin an indefinite strike today as part of a campaign to force the government to introduce uniform electricity charges. The weavers have organised themselves into 75 different action committees to co-ordinate the campaign. A series of strikes and rallies have already taken place.

Indian university teachers strike over pay

Teachers from the Rajendra Agricultural University (RAU) in Muzaffarpur, Patna, in India's Bihar state, began a five-day strike this week to protest against a delay in implementing increased pay scales. The new pay scale has been implemented in every agricultural university throughout the country except two in Bihar. The state government, which only has to pay 20 percent of the rise, has refused to increase salaries.

The Teachers' Association of DDU Gorakhpur University has also decided to begin strike action on Monday if their demands for an increase in the retirement

age, increased benefits, and improved appointment procedures are not met.

Indonesian miners return to work

Miners at PT Kaltim Prima (KPC) in East Kalimantan agreed to return to work on Wednesday and lift their blockade of the mine following a meeting with the Minister of Manpower, Bomer Pasaribu, on Tuesday. Over 150 workers had occupied the mine production facilities since June 14, demanding a 15 percent pay increase and the re-instatement of daily allowances.

The meeting on Tuesday was organised by the Indonesian Tripartite Forum and was attended by employer, trade union and government representatives. It was the second time this week that the miners had entered into negotiations with the company. Talks on Monday broke down when miners refused to accept sanctions imposed on them for the strike. KPC agreed not to dismiss the workers but insisted that it would not pay their wages for the period of the strike. The details of the latest agreement are yet to be made public.

PNG teachers ignore union and resign

Over 3,000 teachers from the Western Highlands and Chimbu provinces of Papua New Guinea ignored opposition from their union, the PNG Teachers Association (PNGTA), and resigned en masse on Monday, closing all education institutions in the provinces.

Teachers have said that the institutions will remain closed until the government meets their demand for a 200 percent pay-rise. Their claim includes a 60.52 percent rise to cover Consumer Price Index (CPI) rises from 1995 and an increase based on an 18-month study by the National Research Institute. The report, "Teachers Work Value Study, Last in Line," outlines 54 recommendations to improve the appalling working conditions of teachers. The report condemns the PNG Government for not providing any salary increases since 1995 and highlights the relative gap between teachers' salaries and that of other similar professions.

An additional 9,000 resignation forms have been distributed in the Southern Highlands, Enga, Western Highlands, Chimbu and Eastern Highlands provinces. It is expected that by the end of this week, 10,000 teachers will have submitted their resignations to the Teaching Services Commission (TSC). Teachers from the New Britain province are also threatening to strike if their claims are not settled by next Thursday.

Australian oil refinery workers strike over pay

Over 450 workers from Esso's Longford Oil and Gas

refinery in eastern Victoria began strike action today in a dispute over wages and superannuation. The workers, members of five different unions, say that Esso's pay offer of 3.5 percent over three years falls far below the 15 percent they are demanding. The strike will specifically target crude oil production and bans will be placed on special projects at all of Esso's Gippsland sites.

Regional council workers strike against job losses

Moree Plains Shire Council, in northwestern New South Wales, and the Municipal Employees Union (MEU), began negotiations on Monday over the council's plans to destroy 40 jobs through forced redundancies and not replacing workers who retire. The plan provoked a 24-hour strike last Friday and was followed by two days of protest marches through the city. The MEU was ordered to end the strike by the Industrial Relations Commission.

Taxi drivers protest at Perth airport

Perth taxi drivers protested at Western Australia's main airport during the week to demand an eight-percent rise in fares. Taxi drivers are being forced to work long hours to meet large increases in their cost of operations. Petrol prices have risen by over 70 percent in the last three years and registration fees for taxis have also increased. Some drivers now work up to 72 hours a week, earning only \$6 an hour.

Drivers say that taxi fares, set by the Department of Transport, have not risen since December 1997. Drivers are also required to pay an airport rank fee of \$1 per pick-up to the airport. The State government recently licensed several hundred-charter vehicles to pick up passengers from Perth airport, taking away work that would normally be done by taxis.



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