

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

20 January 2001

## Chinese chemical workers protest job cuts

Chemical workers in China's northern Jilin province staged a series of protests on January 15 and 16 against mass layoffs and management corruption. The provincial government dispatched a large number of police but no clash occurred.

The workers from the Jilin Chemical Industrial Company marched through the province's main city Jilin, chanting "We want to eat" and "We want to work". Protests against job losses first erupted at the plant on November 4 when the company, which makes a range of products including fertilizers and dyes, announced plans to lay off 80,000 of its 130,000-strong workforce.

Many workers have been at the plant for more than 20 years and are over 40 years old. They believe the severance payment being offered is insufficient because they will not be able to find alternate work in the region.

The workers also claim that management has siphoned off funds for its own use, contributing to the financial difficulties of the company. One worker said officials had made personal gains by importing equipment and claiming it was new. It turned out to be so old it was obsolete.

Further protests are scheduled, involving workers from other factories, to demand an end to job losses, adequate compensation, guaranteed pensions, punishment of corrupt officials and an investigation of the company's accounts.

Factories throughout the province are expected to lay off a total of 100,000 workers in the near future. The main paper plant in Jilin City once employed 6,000 workers but has sacked more than 1,000 over the past few months.

## Korean Daewoo workers strike over job cuts

Unions at Daewoo Motor called a 24-hour strike this week after the company announced that it will lay off a further 2,794 assembly line workers on February 16. This follows the termination of 2,700 employees who have already been forced through so-called voluntary redundancy schemes.

However, according to company sources, production at most of its car manufacturing operations, including those at its main plant in Pupyong, west of Seoul, were hardly affected by the strike. A large number of workers failed to respond to the union's strike call and many of those who did

returned to work just after midday.

Numbers were also down at the afternoon rally organised by the union in the front of the main government complex in downtown Seoul. Less than 300 of the 2,500 workers at the Pupyong plant attended. Official speakers at the rally called for the suspension of the voluntary retirement program, abandonment of layoff schemes and the arrest of Daewoo Group founder Kim Woo-choong.

On the morning of the strike the Daewoo union leaders announced they intended to withdraw from negotiations but immediately reversed their decision after the company said it would begin legal action. The reluctance of Daewoo workers to take further strike action indicates that they have little confidence in the unions, which have already accepted the job cuts and have done everything to limit the months-long campaign.

## Indian police baton charge teachers

Police mounted a baton charge against 350 teachers staging a picket near the residence of Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik's in the Indian state of Orissa on January 17. The teachers had planned to blockade the road between the minister's home and the airport as part of a campaign begun last September. The teachers are seeking the release of government grants, a revision of teachers' pay scales and an increase in the education budget.

The Home Secretary T.K. Mishra maintained that only 10 teachers were injured in the police charge but a spokesman for the All-Orissa Federation of Teachers' Organisations said that over 100 were hurt. At least one was hospitalised after sustaining serious cuts to the head. Another 91 teachers were arrested and 23 still remain in custody on various charges, including attempted murder. Mishra claimed that 19 policemen were injured in the clash.

## Strike by cinema workers in Sri Lanka

Some 80 workers employed at six cinemas owned by the Ceylon Theatres in Sri Lanka went on strike on January 14 in opposition to a scheme recently introduced by the company to force workers to take early retirement. A number have been rehired on lower wages without overtime entitlements and other benefits.

While a permanent worker with about 30 years service earns 6,000 rupees a month (\$US75) those rehired are being paid only 3,950 rupees. The company has also reduced manning to cut costs, employing only one projectionist instead of two.

### **Indian bank employees stage a sit-down protest**

On January 15 public sector bank employees in India staged a sit-down protest in front of branches of the Reserve Bank of India, the country's central bank, against the government's plan to reduce its equity in state-owned banks to only 33 percent. The United Forum of Bank Unions (UFBU), an umbrella organisation of nine bank unions, called the strike.

The sharp reduction of the government's bank holdings is a part of its move to privatise the banking industry in line with the demands of overseas and domestic investors. The move will lead to the loss of jobs and the slashing of working conditions.

The UFBU has threatened to stage an indefinite national strike if the government does not withdraw its plans and has called on other public sector unions to support the action. Public sector unions have made clear that they are willing to let privatisations proceed, provided that the government negotiates with the union leadership.

### **New Zealand port workers renew picket**

Waterfront workers are planning to picket the Port of Nelson in New Zealand's South Island next week to block the loading of logs bound for South Korea on a ship chartered by US multinational Cart Holt Harvey. A union spokesman said this week that the company again refused to hire local permanent workers and was planning use casual non-union labour flown in by stevedoring company Mainland from the country's North Island.

Mainland is a subsidiary of contract labour operator ISO, which has been using non-union labour for years. The union claims that ISO employs only on-call casual labour and is working with waterfront employers to completely casualise the New Zealand wharves.

Over the past two months the New Zealand Waterfront Workers' Union and the Seafarers Union have staged pickets at the Port of Nelson and Port Chalmers to block Mainland workers entering the ports. The pickets have been viciously attacked by the police and by security guards.

During the course of the dispute the unions have ensured that the pickets remain ineffectual. They have not organised broad support from other sections of workers to back the pickets and have allowed mini-buses loaded with Mainland scabs to enter the ports.

### **Protest by Victorian power workers**

Around 200 power workers and their supporters marched through Melbourne last week to protest plans by Yallourn

Energy to eliminate jobs and slash conditions.

The power workers, members of the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU), marched to the company's head office and then to the Industrial Relations Commission where union and company representatives were attending a hearing.

At the centre of the long running dispute is an attempt by Yallourn Energy to push through a new workplace agreement that would allow the increased use of contract labour. The company also plans to sell its open-cut coal mine and shed 226 jobs

Last month the Yallourn Energy workers voted down a three-year union-brokered agreement that gave the company what it wanted.

### **Arnotts workers stop work in Adelaide**

Over 100 workers employed at Arnotts biscuit-making plant in Adelaide, South Australia, walked off the job and held a stop-work meeting on January 11. The stoppage was part of a campaign for a 20 percent pay rise over two years. The company has offered to increase wages by only 3 percent a year.

In response to the stop-work, Arnotts management lodged an application with the Federal Industrial Relations Commission to ban strikes and work stoppages.

According to a union spokesman, the average wage of workers at the plant was \$498 for a 38-hour week—nearly \$30,000 a year less than their colleagues in Sydney.

### **Customs officers vote to strike in Fiji**

On January 16, members of the Fiji Public Service Association employed by the Fiji Revenue and Customs Authority (FRCA), voted for an industrial campaign, including strike action.

The workers are demanding that FRCA begin negotiations on a new collective agreement that includes a 10 percent wage increase and improved working conditions. The old agreement expired on November 2 last year but FRCA management has refused to open up negotiations.

Earlier this month the FRCA attempted to transfer workers to jobs outside of their areas of residence, using the pretext that they had been involved in illegal activity.



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