

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

17 February 2001

Hong Kong truck drivers stage blockade

Over 1,000 truck drivers in Hong Kong struck on February 9 and blockaded Kwai Chung terminal, the world's largest container terminal. Hong Kong television showed long lines of trucks blocking roads to the terminal entrance. The areas of the terminal most affected by the blockade were those operated by some of Hong Kong's most powerful conglomerates, Hutchison Whampoa, Wharf Holdings, and the China-backed COSCO Pacific Ltd.

The drivers were protesting against the refusal of the shipping companies to prepay a new \$HK40 (\$US5.10) handling fee introduced by barge companies to ferry containers to and from waiting ships. The barge operators were demanding that the fee be paid on the spot, meaning that the drivers would be forced to meet the cost.

The blockade was called off on February 13, after a meeting between government officials, barge operators and the truck drivers' representatives agreed that the shipping companies would be billed directly for the handling fee.

Other truck drivers over the four-day period donated more than \$HK140,000 to support the strikers. Remarking on the support, a spokesman said: "This is a social issue, with the livelihoods of thousands of families threatened."

Police attack striking workers in Sri Lanka

On February 9, police attacked workers occupying the Asian Great Unicorn garment factory in Badulla, 230km east of the Sri Lankan capital Colombo. Four women were injured in the assault, three of whom were hospitalised. Before calling in police, management disconnected electricity and water supplies to the factory and to the workers' hostels in an attempt to break the strike. The workers occupied the plant last month after management reneged on an agreement to pay wages on time and upgrade the factory.

Three days later, on February 12, police were set against a picket line of Daintee sweet factory workers in

Ratmalana, about 15km south of Colombo, as they tried to block vehicles transporting strikebreakers into the factory.

Several workers were injured and hospitalised. Another 10 workers, including the Inter Company Workers Union branch secretary, were arrested but later released without being charged. The company has now sacked the branch secretary, together with seven other union activists.

Daintee workers have been on strike since early January demanding a 1,500-rupee (\$US17) increase in their monthly wage.

Sri Lankan manufacturing workers boycott overtime

Workers employed by Wesco, a bus building company in Werahera, Colombo, have placed bans on overtime to demand job security and payment of their salaries on time.

The company presently has no orders on its books and workers fear it is on the edge of bankruptcy. At the end of last year the management announced a voluntary retirement scheme to reduce staff numbers but did not pay compensation to 10 workers who were due to retire in January. The former state-owned factory was privatised in 1993.

Indian colleges strike over government cuts

Colleges in the state of Bangalore will close on February 15 to protest the government's recent decision to cut grants by 15 percent. The strike has been called by four labour organisations, led by the Bangalore University College Teachers' Association. The grant reduction will force colleges to increase fees and reduce assistance to students from poor rural areas. Teachers also fear the cut will lead to a reduction in wages. An indefinite strike is planned for February 26 if the government refuses to restore the funding.

Protests against mine deaths in India

Protests are continuing by the families and co-workers of 30 miners killed in the February 2 mine flood at the state-owned mine in Bagdigi, in the Indian state of Bihar.

Demonstrations have been held outside the mine over the slowness of the rescue operations and recovery of bodies. So far only 10 bodies have been recovered but they were so badly disfigured they could only be identified by the serial number on their cap lamps. Management estimates that it will take at least another five days to find more bodies, as they lie beneath thick layers of silt and mud.

Refusing to face the families, the Minister of Coal canceled a visit to Bagdigi. On at least one occasion police have been set against the protests and journalists reporting on the issue.

The disaster occurred when the miners broke through the wall of a disused water-filled mine shaft adjacent to where they were working. The decision to mine the area breached government regulations forbidding coal mining unless there is a 60-metre barrier between an operative and disused mine.

Coal companies, however, frequently violate safety procedures, particularly in the last quarter of the financial year, in order to meet production targets. A lack of qualified surveyors and inadequate mining maps also contributed to the disaster. The government suspended three management officials at the mine this week pending an investigation.

Last Friday another miner was killed at Chaitudih colliery. The miner was drowned when management insisted on mining in an area next to an abandoned shaft, releasing 600 cubic metres of water towards 114 miners who were working underground at the time.

Australian dockyard workers locked out

Tenix shipyard workers in Melbourne were locked out last Wednesday after they imposed workplace bans in an attempt to force the company to improve its redundancy provisions.

The bans stopped the operation of machinery which lifted anything over 100 tonnes, restricted workers from doing work outside their classifications and stopped the completion of paper work affecting the commissioning and allocation of work.

The new workplace agreement, originally agreed to by the unions but voted down by workers, contained a redundancy package that provided only two weeks pay for every year of service and pro-rata long service leave after five years of employment.

Tenix's present contracts to build 10 Anzac class frigates for the Australian and New Zealand navies are due to finish by 2004-5. The company may locate its entire shipbuilding operations to South Australia,

threatening the 2,000 jobs in Melbourne. Last October Tenix axed 242 jobs.

Steel workers strike

Emergency service crews at BHP's Port Kembla steel plant on the New South Wales south coast walked off the job for 24 hours on Tuesday over the company decision to outsource their jobs. The strike affected production across the plant when about 2,000 production workers refused to start their shifts without medical personnel on site.

There were 80 workers involved in the strike, including fire fighters, ambulance drivers, medical officers and security personnel. The industrial action comes a week after a 24-hour strike by 4,000 production and maintenance workers over BHP's plans to contract out maintenance tasks and get rid of over 800 jobs.

Hotel management refuses to reinstate sacked workers

Scuffles broke out in the main entrance of the five-star Wentworth Hotel in Sydney on February 14 when security guards blocked 150 workers from entering the hotel's foyer. The workers were demonstrating against the management's refusal to obey a direction by the Australian Industrial Relations Commission (AIRC) to reinstate 20 workers sacked last week. The sackings are part of the terms under which the hotel has been sold.

The AIRC issued the reinstatement order after the hotel's workforce went on strike for 24 hours and set up a picket last week. Commissioner Frank Raffaelli directed management to re-employ the sacked workers at least until March 5 to allow negotiations with the union to take place. Wentworth Hotel management has agreed to pay the workers' wages until then but has ruled out reinstatement.



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