

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

3 March 2001

Daewoo workers battle police in South Korea

Autoworkers protesting against layoffs by Daewoo Motor clashed with riot police in two South Korean cities on February 24. Dozens of workers were injured and arrested.

About 2,000 workers and supporters marched through the streets near Daewoo's main plant in Pupyong, 30km west of Seoul. The protesters hurled rocks and firebombs at 7,000 riot police who blockaded the road to Pupyong Station where the protestors had planned to hold a mass rally.

In Pusan, the nation's second-largest city, 700 protestors marched through downtown streets demanding Daewoo management cancel the layoff notices issued to 1,751 workers at the Pupyong plant. The demonstrators occupied an eight-lane boulevard and burned tires.

Saturday's clashes marked the fifth consecutive day of street rallies by Daewoo workers after some 4,000 riot police stormed the Pupyong plant last Monday to end an occupation against the sackings.

Despite pledges by the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions that the unions would fight the layoffs, the numbers at the demonstrations indicate that union leadership is doing little to mobilise support.

Daewoo Motor has been under court receivership since last November. It is seeking to restructure its local and overseas operations and sell the company. This week Daewoo announced that unions representing workers at its passenger car plant in Poland had accepted a deal to slash 1,294 jobs from the 4,943-strong workforce. Daewoo also plans to sell off its commercial vehicle plant in Poland and a research centre in Britain.

More deaths in Chinese mines

China's mining industry claimed the lives of another 18 workers on February 22, when a gas blast ripped through a mine near the city of Lianyuan, in the central province of Hunan. The death toll may increase as three miners are still missing.

Investigations have begun to determine the cause of the explosion and government officials ordered mines in the surrounding area to cease production and carry out safety checks.

China has the highest number of coal mining deaths in the world. According to official figures, 5,300 miners were killed last year alone. However, the real count is suspected to be much higher as government authorities downplay the number of deaths.

A report in the *People's Daily* this week confirmed that following the explosion at a privately-owned coal mine in Hejin, in Shanxi province, on December 3, a local Communist Party official attempted to hide 38 bodies to cover up the extent of the disaster. In all, 42 workers perished and another 21 were injured.

Last year the government closed 18,000 coal mines because they breached the minimal official safety standards.

Nurses in Sri Lanka strike for risk allowance

More than 600 nurses working in government hospitals in the war-torn North and East provinces went on strike on Monday to demand a risk allowance similar to that paid to doctors working in the area. Doctors recently won the allowance after a series of strikes and protests.

Conditions for all medical staff are dangerous because of the ongoing war between the Sri Lankan government and the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

A spokesman explained that they faced the very same dangers as doctors. "Therefore it is only just to pay a risk allowance." The nurses are planning further industrial action.

Former transport workers in Pakistan demand payment

Workers who took a voluntary retirement package from the Sindh Road Transport Corporation (SRTC) in Hyderabad staged a demonstration on February 24 to protest the non-payment of entitlements owing to them.

A spokesman warned that if the money was not paid immediately, protests would be organised throughout the province on March 6, coinciding with the Muslim holiday festival Eid-UI-Azha.

New Zealand meat company ends lockout

Meat workers employed by PPCS Silverstream in Otago returned to work on February 27 after being locked out for 10 days. The management imposed the lockout after the

workers began industrial action over a new work contract.

The union called for the return to work without the company agreeing to any of the workers' demands for a one-year contract, seniority rights and a 5 percent wage increase. The company had previously rejected the claim and demanded a two-year agreement.

Otago-Southland Meat Workers Union president Daryl Carran said the union had recommended a return to work, "so both parties could get back to talking across the table".

New Zealand hospital cleaners return to work

Cleaners employed by Australian-owned cleaning contractor Spotless Services in Wellington, Kenepuru and Paraparaumu returned to work on February 28 after the company lifted the lockdown it imposed two days earlier.

The lockdown began after negotiations for a pay increase broke down. The cleaners' union is seeking an increase of 97 cents an hour but the company refused to budge on its offer of just 22 cents. The union had already cut the workers' original pay demand from 15 percent to 4 percent.

During the lockdown the 100 workers picketed the hospitals and won considerable support from the public. One worker said: "Last year Spotless made a profit of more than \$13 million, they can afford to pay us fair wages". Presently, the cleaners earn less than \$10 an hour. Negotiations between Spotless and the union are due to begin again on Friday.

Australian mines hit by seven-day strike

Some 1,400 coal miners began a seven-day strike on February 28, bringing BHP's Crinum, Gregory, Norwich, Saraji and Peak Downs mines in central Queensland to a standstill. The workers are demanding a new work contract, including a 15 percent pay increase over two years and the restoration of a number of conditions surrendered by the union in 1998. The men have rejected a company offer of 18.9 percent over three years.

This week the company applied to the Industrial Relations Commission to terminate the official bargaining period for the new work agreement, a measure that would make further industrial action illegal under the government's Workplace Relations Act. A BHP spokesman said that the company was incurring charges from shipping companies worth millions of dollars.

Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) Queensland secretary Andrew Vickers said that in the light of the company's legal challenge, the union would have to "rethink it plans to continue rolling stoppages at the end of the present seven-day strike".

Building workers strike over long service leave entitlements

Thousands of building workers in Victoria struck on March 1 to demand improved long service leave entitlements. Major building companies hit by the strike

included Boulderstone-Hornibrook, AbiGroup, Vibropile and Galvins, Kanes and Hooker Cochrane.

Workers also walked off state government building projects, but the union said these sites would be exempt from industrial action in the future. The strike was called after 500 union delegates met in Melbourne on the previous day and endorsed a campaign of industrial action.

Presently construction workers receive long service leave after 15 years with pro-rata payments after 10 years. Because many workers leave the industry before then, only 23 per cent become eligible. The workers are demanding entitlements after 10 years and pro-rata long service after seven years.

Guest workers paid starvation wages on Australian building site

Eight Indian stone masons employed to construct a Hindu temple at Helensburgh in New South Wales stopped work on Monday, demanding that the temple's management committee increase their wages to the legal level and provide other entitlements.

The eight men, who have been in Australia for three years on guest workers' visas, have been paid only 15 percent of the minimum legal wage for construction workers. They receive just \$45 a month in hand and a further \$100 is sent to their families in Southern India. For the entire period they have lived in run-down portable sheds on the construction site.

The men walked off the job after joining the construction union. Union officials confirmed that they have begun talks with the president of the temple's committee of management, Sydney pathologist Dr Perumal Janarthanan.



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