

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

10 March 2001

Daewoo workers clash with police in South Korea

Over 1,000 riot police battled with 1,500 laid-off Daewoo Motor workers and their supporters on March 7, at a rally outside the company's main plant in Pupyong, 30 kilometres west of Seoul.

The plant had just been reopened after being idled by the company on February 16 to reduce production levels. Workers defied warnings to disperse, hurling fire-bombs and stones to fight back against police who moved in to make arrests.

Over 100 retrenched workers and supporters were detained after they lay down in the street to block buses taking other employees into the plant. The crowd chanted: "Down with the government of President Kim Dae-jung, which is forcing workers out of jobs."

Some 1,800 workers were laid off last month as part of restructuring plans aimed at making the company, which has been declared bankrupt, attractive to a takeover, possibly by General Motors.

Dan Byoung-ho, head of the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), the country's second largest peak union body, called for a halt to lay-offs and promised that the protests would continue. However the KCTU is not organising any significant support among its large membership to back the Daewoo workers and the numbers at protests are declining.

Chinese miners blockade roads

On March 8, some 2,000 coal miners blockaded roads and fought with police near the Shanxi province city of Datong, several hundred kilometres to the west of Beijing. Initial reports indicate that the workers were protesting against their imminent retrenchment from the Baidong mine. Once laid off, they will no longer be eligible for company-provided health care and, under conditions of high unemployment, are unlikely to find other work. The miners, who suffer a high rate of work-related illnesses, are concerned they will be unable to pay for medical treatment.

The national government has ordered that hundreds more unprofitable or unproductive coal mines be shut down. In Shanxi province however, the industry is a central employer. Mines employ an estimated 500,000 people in the Datong area alone. A series of protests and strikes have erupted in the region.

Both the local government and the trade union denied that any incident had taken place. A union official described the miners as "a little extreme" and "uncultured".

Indonesia drivers protest bus terminal closure

Public transportation drivers working the Pariaman-Padang route in West Sumatra struck on March 6 and demonstrated outside the local government office in Pariaman over the relocation of a major

bus terminal.

The drivers claim they have lost income as the relocation has caused many passengers to use alternate routes or other means of transport.

One striking driver stated: "We have to give the vehicle owners between 150,000 rupiah and 200,000 rupiah hire fee each day, but are not even taking that amount of money in fares."

The strikers have issued a call to bus drivers on the Pasaman-Pariaman and Lubuk Basung-Pariaman routes to stop work in support.

Protests by Indonesian garment workers

Over 250 workers from sock manufacturer PT Nagamas Busana Tama in North Jakarta staged a demonstration outside the city council building on March 6 to demand recognition of their union. The workers have been on strike since February 26.

The union's secretary said that the Independent Workers Union (SPM) had been established on November 5 but the management had worked to undermine it. "The firm even established a rival union last month instead of recognising us," she said. She also claimed the management had filed a police complaint against her and the SPM's chairman.

Despite company intimidation, 85 percent of the firm's 550 employees joined the SPM, which is affiliated with the Indonesian Metal Workers Union.

The strikers are also demanding that the company act on the government's decision to raise the monthly minimum wage from 344,000 rupiah to 426,000, effective from January 1. The firm only began paying the increase from February.

In a separate protest, workers from PT Biba Multi Jaya, a garment factory in West Java, marched to the provincial legislature to oppose a wage cut.

A spokesman said that the company had slashed their two-weekly payment of 120,000 rupiah to between 60,000 and 70,000 rupiah and had refused to give any explanation. "We need to fight the pay cut because we do not have any other source of income," he said.

Sri Lankan tyre workers oppose suspensions

On March 2, workers at Ceat Kalani International Tyres (CKIT), in Kalaniya, Colombo, demonstrated in front of the factory to demand the immediate reinstatement of 17 suspended colleagues. The company suspended the 17 last week and sent letters to 50 other workers warning that they could face similar disciplinary action for taking unpaid leave.

The company, once government-owned and known as Kalani

Tyres, was privatised in 1992. Working conditions and benefits have been steadily eroded since then. The workforce has been slashed from 2,000 to 200 and workloads sharply increased, leading to injuries, hernias and back problems.

The workers are also required to handle harmful materials such as petrol, sulphur, silicon, and carbon dust without the proper protective gear. Workers have suffered various work related ailments, including high blood pressure, congestion and continuous coughing, and have been compelled to take unpaid leave.

Aluminum workers fight privatisation in India

Workers employed by Bharat Aluminum (BALCO) in Bhopal launched an indefinite strike on March 3 in opposition to the government's decision to privatise the company. Established in 1965 with technological support from the former Soviet Union and Hungary, BALCO produces about 15 percent of India's aluminum.

Australian healthcare workers demand improved conditions

Healthcare workers in Victoria have stepped up a campaign for a 12.5 percent wage increase, improved working conditions and more staff. General staff and nurses at the Alfred and Frankston Hospitals in Melbourne imposed work bans on Tuesday, similar to those begun in the state's rural north-west last week.

Cleaners, caterers and porters at hospitals at St Arnaud, Maryborough, Swan Hill and Kerang, as well as at Geelong's Grace McKellar Centre, which provides rehabilitation and aged-care services, have also put bans in place. Staff at St Vincent's Hospital are refusing to move rubbish or to operate fax and mail services, while workers at Northern Hospital have bans on rubbish removal, cleaning and preparing theatre instruments. Workers at Ballarat Base Hospital have begun rolling stoppages.

Esso workers continue work bans

Maintenance workers at Esso's Longford gas plant in Gippsland, Victoria, are maintaining work bans despite legal threats by the company. Esso claims that the bans are illegal under the federal Workplace Relations Act.

Esso workers imposed the bans in early February demanding a 15 percent pay rise over three years, plus an additional three percent increase to compensate for changes to job classifications.

An Australian Workers Union spokesman said that the workers were only asking for the same conditions the company has already given to members of the Communications, Electrical and Plumbing Union at the Longford site.

South Australian construction workers protest over building deaths

Construction workers in Adelaide went on strike on March 8 to protest five deaths on the state's building sites since the beginning of the year. The 500 workers, carrying symbolic coffins and placards, brought traffic to a standstill when they marched to the office of Workplace Relations Minister Robert Lawson.

The stop-work protest was called by the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union who blamed "government inaction" in enforcing workplace safety for the deaths of the five men—two construction workers, two electricians and a cleaning contractor.

A union spokesman said that there was only one workplace safety inspector for the city centre and just four others to cover all remaining metropolitan areas. He described the lack of workplace

safety inspectors in the State as "a disgrace".

The lack of inspectors is not the only reason for unsafe working conditions on building sites. The unions themselves have assisted in undermining safety by the continuous trading off of working conditions. In most states for example, construction workers now work in wet weather, increasing the risk of falls and other accidents.

South Australian rail union threatens further industrial action

About 150 members of the South Australian branch of the Rail, Tram and Bus Union went on strike for 24 hours on March 7 and picketed rail freight lines in Adelaide to campaign for a 21 percent pay increase. Rail authorities called police on several occasions to remove striking workers who were preventing trains from entering Port Adelaide's Ausbulk grain terminal.

The SA rail management has offered only a 10 percent increase, spread over three years. The workers have not received a wage increase since 1997.

Lockout at Sydney paint plant extended

The management of Mirotone Paint in the Sydney suburb of Revesby has extended a lockout by another two weeks. The workers, who were barred from entering the plant on February 22 after negotiations over a new enterprise work agreement failed, were due to return to work last Monday.

The company wants to introduce individual work contracts at the plant and is demanding the elimination of the present 35-hour week. If successful at Mirotone, the lengthened working week could become a benchmark for the entire paint industry. Taubmans, Wattyl and Selleys all presently operate on a 35-hour week.

A union spokesman said that it was "worried" that the management's decision to extend the lockout "will only inflame the situation and will not help resolve the differences between the company and union members." The locked out workers are manning a 24-hour picket outside the plant.



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