

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

24 March 2001

More police attacks on Daewoo protestors

Riot police attacked Daewoo Motor workers and students attending a 2,000-strong demonstration on March 17 in Seoul. The demonstration was called to protest against mass layoffs and the possible closure of the company's main Pupyong car plant, located 30 kilometres from the capital. Demonstrators chanted anti-government and anti-US slogans and called for the reinstatement of 1,750 workers recently sacked from the plant as part of Daewoo's ongoing restructuring.

As the rally ended riot police charged a group of over 500 people injuring one and arresting several others. The protestors retaliated by throwing stones and firebombs. Other protests took place in Pusan, Kwangju, Suwon, Taejon, Chonan, Wonju and Cheju City.

Following the clash police announced that they were considering re-introducing the use of tear gas to break up future demonstrations. The increasingly violent response to this and earlier protests follows a recent statement to US investors by South Korea's President Kim Dae Jung promising to crack down on opposition to the government's restructuring plans.

This week the country's two largest peak union bodies—Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) and the Federation of Korean Trade Unions (FKTU)—made decisions that will strengthen the hand of the government.

The KCTU decided at its annual general meeting to “restrain from national-level strikes” in its annual campaign for improved wages and conditions. A union spokesman said: “We are influenced by several external factors such as unemployment, economic downturn and ongoing restructuring.”

A FKTU committee meeting attended by business and government representatives also declared that strikes would be “minimised”. An FKTU official declared said that, “such decisions were made after recognising labour strikes are unrealistic with current unemployment level and economic slowdown.”

Indonesian hotel workers injured in police assault

On March 17, police wielding heavy sticks attacked and beat 300 workers picketing the five-star Shangri-La hotel in Central Jakarta, Indonesia. Several workers were injured in the assault. The workers, members of the 900-strong workforce on strike since December 22, were protesting over the management's use

of contract labour to reopen the hotel.

The protestors arrived at the hotel at about 3pm carrying banners and posters and wearing white headbands. Some carried a coffin bearing the names of the hotel's owners, Robert Kuok and Robert Lyman. “Their hearts have already died. May they rest in hell,” shouted one worker.

Jakarta's chief of police ordered the attack on the peaceful demonstration claiming it was hindering traffic. Shangri-La union chairman, Halilintar Nurdin, condemned the assault and declared that the demonstrations would continue until all sacked workers were reinstated and management agreed to striker's demands.

The workers are demanding full reinstatement as well as improved wages and working conditions, including a fair method of distributing money to employees from hotel service charges.

Philippine bank employees protest for wage increase

Employees from the Philippine Business Commerce Bank began a national campaign this week after rejecting a 7 percent pay offer by management. The workers are seeking a 50 percent wage increase spread over two years as part of a new work agreement currently being negotiated.

Employees are planning to picket the bank's 47 branches before work and during lunch break. Staff at the Tiano-Hayes and Cagayan City branches began daily picketing on March 19.

The PBC-Employees Association called the protests after negotiations on the work agreement became deadlocked on March 15. Union spokesman Jay Tan said that most of the county's other banks had already offered pay increases of 15 to 20 percent.

Indian workers protest budget measures

More than 100,000 workers rallied in Bombay on March 21 to oppose to the Indian government's recent budget proposals. The budget makes it easier for private companies to layoff employees and will slash the public sector workforce by 10 percent over the next five years.

Under previous legislation, companies with less than 100 employees do not require government approval for any layoffs or closures. The budget raises the threshold to 1,000 employees. Approximately 80 percent of companies in India fall within this category.

While workers attended the demonstration to defend their

jobs, organisers attempted to divert their concerns along nationalist lines. Subhash Desai, a spokesman for the Hindu extremist party, Shiv Sena, told the rally: “We should take a pledge to throw foreign companies out of India. That is the only way we can preserve our identity otherwise we are on the threshold of economic slavery.”

Nepal government declares hotel strike illegal

More than 200,000 hotel workers in Nepal struck on March 15 to demand the introduction of a 10 percent service charge to boost wages and improve working conditions. Union leaders, however, called off the strike later that day after the National Congress government declared the hotel industry an essential service. Under the Essential Services Act, strikes are already illegal in the postal service, transport, telecommunications, electricity, water distribution and the government press.

The strike was called by two major hotel unions after a court rejected an application by hotel employers for a restraining order and ruled that industrial action was legal. Police arrested more than 80 workers protesting outside various top hotels in Kathmandu.

Last year Nepalese hotel workers staged several protests over the same issue. Union leaders called off a planned national strike last November after the government promised to establish a committee to “settle the issue in a fair way”.

Sri Lankan hospital staff demand payment of loans

More than 4,300 staff members and doctors from Kandy's General Hospital in Sri Lanka's Central Province, staged a half-day strike on March 19 over the non-payment of government loans for vehicle, housing and hardship. Although the loans were approved some time ago the government has not made the money available.

The strike, which excluded emergency and essential services, shut down most departments in the hospital. A union spokesman said: “If the government and the hospital authorities fail to take immediate action we will take united industrial action in the coming days.”

Buttercup sacks bread workers

Bakers and other production workers at Goodman Fielder's Buttercup bakery in Broadmeadow in the Australian state of New South Wales, began picketing the plant on March 24, a day after the company announced that it would end production next month. The decision means that 58 workers—a third of the plant's workforce—will be retrenched.

Picketing workers said the decision was a complete surprise. Last week management told them the plant was making a \$30,000 a week profit and no major changes would occur for at least two years. One employee, who had worked as a cleaner at the bakery for nine years, said: “We work hard, we meet their [management's] targets, and they do this. They stab us in the back.”

The closure is part of Goodman Fielder's plans to cut costs and increase productivity by centralising baking operations at its Moorebank plant in Sydney. Last year the company closed

several grain mills in NSW.

Workers protest inadequate compensation offer

Workers from Sydney building sites marched with asbestos sufferers and their families through the city centre on March 21 to condemn low compensation payments being offered by James Hardie Industries.

Last month the building products company, which has admitted to being a source of asbestos-related diseases, established an investment fund of only \$293 million to meet current and future claims.

The protest, which also included electrical and maritime industry workers, gathered outside James Hardie's offices in Sydney. One speaker told the crowd the effects of asbestos-related disease would be felt over the next 20 or 30 years. “For years and years and years, James Hardie knew the effect of asbestos on workers, but they continued to deny its effects. What happens for us when the \$293 million goes away?”

Gosford retiree Marie Marchant, who lost her husband Earl to asbestos-related disease two months ago, attended the protest. She said that her husband had worked in demolition for seven years in the 1980s and that asbestos “had cut short the life of an otherwise healthy man at the age of 68”.

Miners reject productivity deal

Workers from the Glenmore Bulga open cut mine in the Hunter Valley, New South Wales, walked off the job for 48 hours on March 18 over the company's attempt to tie wage demands to productivity increases. This is the third strike by the 270 miners since negotiations for a new work agreement broke down late last month when management served the union with its own draft agreement. The management draft included a \$3,000 annual incentive bonus conditional on the workforce reaching specified production targets.

Stramit workers walk off the job

Workers from Stramit Building Products in Cardiff, near Newcastle, struck for 24 hours on March 22, following a breakdown in enterprise bargaining negotiations. The workers are demanding a wage rise and the establishment of a trust fund to secure workers' entitlements in the case of closure. The company has rejected this latter demand and wants any pay rise pegged to productivity increases. The union initially claimed an 8 percent pay increase, but it is now attempting to negotiate for 4 to 5 percent.



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