

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

31 March 2001

Workers in China demand pay and pensions

Workers from two large factories in China staged separate protests on March 26 over delays in the payment of unemployment benefits and pensions.

Around 1,500 workers from the Number Seven Metallurgical Construction Company in the southern province of Guizhou blocked roads in the provincial capital demanding payments owing for the past year. They also called for an increase in the 300-yuan (\$US36) a month retirement pension. The plant's 7,000 strong workforce has been cut to 4,000 through retirements and layoffs.

On the same day, around 500 workers from the Xinye County Fertilizer Factory in the central province of Henan, blockaded streets outside the provincial government demanding back-pay owing since the factory closed one year ago amid a corruption scandal involving top management.

There has been a significant increase in the number of demonstrations and protests by Chinese workers over the last 12 months as the central government pushes ahead with plant closures and wholesale layoffs in order to gain membership of the World Trade Organisation.

Daewoo workers clash with police

The South Korea government has continued its crackdown on protests against layoffs at the ailing Daewoo Motor Company. On March 24 baton-wielding riot police, supported by two helicopters, attacked 500 people, including former Daewoo workers, near the company's main plant in Pupyong.

The police assault was aimed at stopping workers marching to the city centre for a demonstration. The protestors were eventually pushed back into the grounds of a nearby university where they had been holding a rally.

In February, Daewoo laid off 1,750 workers at Pupyong to prepare the company for sale to an overseas buyer. Daewoo, South Korea's third largest carmaker, was declared bankrupt last November.

Airport workers in South Korea vote to strike

Airport and airline workers in South Korea have overwhelmingly voted to boycott the official opening of the new Incheon International Airport and strike on March 29 and April 2. The workers, mostly employed by Korean Air, Asiana Airlines, Asiana Airport Service and the Korea Airport Service, are demanding an exemption from the \$US9 toll charge on the airport highway.

The Ministry of Labour warned workers that the strikes would be illegal. The government is hoping Incheon will become the air traffic hub for northeast Asia catering for 1,000 international

flights a week. Incheon has been eight years in construction and cost a massive \$US5.5 billion with one-third funded from government coffers.

Even before operations begin, the new airport has had substantial problems with its baggage handling system and x-ray network, which has been unable to identify knives and guns in luggage. Despite the problems, the government refuses to consider delaying the airport opening.

Filipino workers attacked by security guards

On March 27, at least 10 employees at Kita Corp, a company located in the Clark Field Economic Zone in Pampanga, were injured after being attacked by security guards carrying shotguns and pistols. A scuffle broke out when striking workers tried to block two cargo trucks from entering the firm's premises. The security guards were not wearing any form of identification at the time of the assault.

Over 300 workers at Kita Corp have been on strike since March 9, when they learnt that management planned to close the plant by April 15. Kita management, which retrenched 250 workers in January, claim the closure is due to a lack of orders from audiovisual manufacturer Aiwa, its main client.

Strikers want the company to remain open and have demanded that management stop transferring machinery to Kita's sister firm in Laguna. A union spokesman accused management of "farming out" work to other companies in preparation for Kita's closure. In line with the region's Labor Code, retrenched workers only receive a half-month salary as severance pay.

Indonesian seamen demand removal of union officials

More than 500 Indonesian workers employed on foreign ships demonstrated in Jakarta last weekend to demand the reform of their union, including the resignation of all government-appointed union officials. On March 23, seamen occupied the Indonesian Seamen's Association (KPI) headquarters in Central Jakarta for several hours. The seamen seized several KPI executives during the occupation.

A spokesman said the protestors wanted an "extraordinary union congress" to make reforms. "Workers have a right to unionise and all positions must be given to workers. Corrupt and collusive practices must be halted," he said.

Workers want to replace KPI chairman Iskandar Illahude, who is classification bureau director at the government's Directorate General of Sea Transportation, and KPI treasurer Harun Let-let, chief of the ministry's financial bureau.

The 32,000 Indonesian seamen employed on foreign ships are

poorly paid and suffer chronic working conditions.

Sri Lankan workers demand fulltime jobs

Up to 100 workers from five factories demonstrated outside the Labor Department in Colombo on March 27, demanding job permanency. The protestors represented about 600 casual workers employed on a daily basis at the Dipped Products, Grossart, Hechem, Venigross and Olga companies, affiliated to the Hayles Group.

The casuals, who are employed via contractors, receive a daily wage of 121 rupees (\$US1.42). The companies pay the sub-contractors 15 rupee (17 cents) per day for each worker provided. Those seeking work are forced to assemble outside the factory gates each morning.

Workers strike at BHP mines

On March 28, 100 workers from the Hay Point coal loading terminal near Mackay in northern Queensland walked off the job in support of 1,400 striking BHP miners at Peak Downs, Gregory, Norwick Park, Saraji and Crinum. The miners have staged a series of 24-hour stoppages in the last month after a breakdown in negotiations for a new enterprise work agreement.

The miners rejected an 18.9 percent pay increase over three years because it was tied to various trade-offs including the greater use of contractors and the surrender of seniority rights. The miners' union recently agreed to these concessions at Rio Tinto coalmines in the Hunter Valley.

Over the last 15 months BHP miners have faced a series of company provocations, including lockout threats late last year. During the latest 24-hour stoppage security guards hired by the BHP drove unlit vehicles at high speed through a picket line at the Saraji mine after dark.

This week BHP announced that it would apply to the Industrial Relations Commission to end the bargaining period for the enterprise agreement making further strike action illegal. Under the federal government's Workplace Relations Act industrial action is only legal during the officially sanctioned bargaining periods. BHP claims that work stoppages had cost \$60 million in lost production and \$35 million in demurrage costs to coal ships waiting off Hay Point.

Steel workers strike to defend jobs

Several hundred workers at BHP's Westernport Steel Mill southeast of Melbourne struck for 24-hours on March 27 over the company's decision to sell-off Australian steel assets following its merger with Billiton, the British-based mining and mineral company.

Some 300 workers at BHP's Port Kembla steel plant in New South Wales followed the Westernport strike by staging a protest inside the plant over the use of contractors. There have been ongoing work stoppages at Port Kembla after the company decided to outsource maintenance, security and ambulance services, thus threatening 900 jobs.

A union spokesman said workers were concerned about job security and the "retention of an Australian-owned steel industry". But whatever company buys BHP's steel assets will continue the restructuring program begun three years ago by BHP which has seen the axing of thousands of jobs.

Union opposes strike at Buttercup

Buttercup bakery workers in Newcastle have been told by their union not to strike over job losses at the threatened plant. Last week Goodman Fielders, which owns the bakery, said they planned to end production at the site and retrench 58 workers or one-third of the workforce. When angry workers walked off the job in protest the Miscellaneous Workers Union (MWU) told them to follow an Industrial Relations Commission recommendation and return to work.

This week the MWU told a mass meeting of workers that there should be no further strikes and directed them to approach local retailers and persuade them to boycott Buttercup products. The union has not called a union meeting at the Moorebank plant in Sydney, which will take up the Buttercup production, or any other Goodman Fielders plants.

Strikes at Esso refinery

Around 200 construction workers at Esso's Longford gas refinery took indefinite strike action on March 23 over the forced transfer of an employee. Worley A-B-A, a company contracted to repair damage caused by a gas explosion at the refinery in 1998, employs the workers.

In separate dispute, 80 maintenance workers from Esso's Long Island and Longford plants are continuing their strike for improved pay and conditions. The company has taken the dispute to the Industrial Relations Commission and the Supreme Court in an attempt to force an end to three-week strike action.

Call centre workers walk out

More than 100 phone operators at the TAB Sydney call centre walked off the job on March 24, the first day of the NSW Autumn racing carnival. The industrial action disrupted phone-betting services for the estimated 170,000 people that have accounts with the gaming company.

Workers said they struck over job security and a planned relocation of the call centre from Ultimo, near the city centre, to Western Sydney. TAB wants to cut jobs through the introduction of voice recognition technology. For the last two weeks call centre management has ignored workers' demands for negotiations over the changes.



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