

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

9 March 2002

Unrest sweeps China's oilfields

Reports from China indicate that tens of thousands of workers laid-off from the Daqing oilfield, in northeastern Heilongjiang province, have been demonstrating since March 1 to demand the restoration of their welfare benefits and pension guarantees.

The unrest was sparked when Daqing Petroleum reneged on a redundancy deal. Under the agreement, workers were guaranteed a retirement pension providing they paid 2,600 yuan (\$315) per year into the company's social security fund. They were also guaranteed a 3,000-yuan heating subsidy and other benefits. In February, however, the company announced it was not paying the subsidy and increased the social security levy to 4,600 yuan.

On March 1, some 3,000 unemployed oil workers stoned the company headquarters, breaking dozens of windows. From March 4 to 6, between 40,000 to 50,000 workers are said to have demonstrated outside the building. Local authorities responded by mobilising paramilitary police units and deploying a tank regiment onto the streets. To pursue their demands, workers are reported to have formed the "Daqing Retrenched Workers Provisional Union". Sympathy strikes and other protests are believed to have taken place at the Xinjiang, Shengli and Liaohe oilfields.

Indonesian workers strike against management corruption

Management at the state-owned aircraft manufacturing company PT Dirgantara Indonesia suspended two executive members of the union (Forum of Communications for Employees) after 1,000 workers walked off the job at the company's two facilities in Bandung, West Java, on March 5.

A management spokesman said that Arif Minardi, chairman of the labor union, and A.M. Bone, the union's secretary-general, were suspended for "violating the law". Workers say that the suspensions are an attempt to force the union to drop its demands for an investigation into corruption allegations.

Union officials claim that the management has refused to honour an agreement with the union to deal with alleged cases of "corrupt, collusive and nepotistic practices" in the company. According to a union spokesman, the management has not investigated the theft of four billion rupiah (\$US400,000) at the company's aircraft service division in 1999 and the disappearance of 18 NC-212 aircraft engines worth \$US400,000 in 1998. The company has also refused to honour an agreement last year to improve workers' pension benefits.

Hanafie Asnan, the head of the Air Force and a company director, has demanded the management take "strict action" against the strikers. He said this week: "In the military, this kind of

(labour) action is considered a coup that must be quelled immediately."

Philippines construction workers oppose lockout

Police were called to "protect company property" when building workers demonstrated outside a Cebu City residential construction site, Paseo San Ramon in Banawa. Handumanan Development Corp (HDC) locked 88 workers out of the site this week.

The workers are being subjected to a union-busting operation. After they formed a union, Kilusang Mayo Uno (KMU), they were notified by HDC that their employment had been transferred to the body-hire company, Lines Architects and Engineers. When they refused to accept new working conditions stipulated by the contractor, they were all sacked.

General strike paralyses Indian state

Businesses across India's southern state of Kerala came to a standstill on March 5 when trade unions called a general strike in support of the month-long strike by 500,000 government employees and teachers. The government workers are fighting a state government decision to cut benefits and defer salary payments for February and March as part of budget austerity measures. The lost benefits include government loans to purchase homes and cars as well as travel allowances.

The sympathy general strike closed down bus services, workplaces, shops and offices across the state. Workers in state-run industrial units, banks, insurance companies, postal service and telecommunications firms took part in the action.

Despite mounting opposition, the Kerala government has shown no signs of relenting. Industrial action may increase in the next days with doctors and hospital staff preparing to strike. Doctors and paramedics have already staged a 24-hour solidarity strike, closing many services at government hospitals, public health centres and medical colleges.

India's junior doctors end strike over assault

On March 5, junior doctors in Lucknow, the capital of the northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, called off a week-long strike. The doctors had struck to demand the suspension of a deputy superintendent of police who had assaulted one of their colleagues. The authorities have agreed to investigate.

Sri Lankan doctors demand improved facilities

About 100 doctors at the Negombo base hospital, 35 km north from Colombo, began a campaign of work bans on March 5 to gain improved working conditions. The doctors are refusing to work after 4pm.

According to a spokesman for the Government Medical Officers

Association (GMOA), the hospital has not provided doctors enough living quarters or meal rooms. Because of the lack of facilities, intern doctors on 24-hour call are forced to stay in private accommodation or at friend's houses.

Last month, the Western Provincial Director of Health promised to meet the doctors' demands within two weeks. The hospital is situated in a highly congested area and treats around 1,000 outpatients daily as well as 500 patients from other clinic. It presently caters for about 600 to 700 in-house patients.

Sri Lankan tea workers demonstrate for job security

Some 200 workers from the Brookbond and Lipton tea manufacturing plant in Mabole demonstrated at the Labor Ministry in Colombo on March 6 against a management plan to close the factory.

The company, a subsidiary of Unilever, has submitted an application to the Labor Ministry seeking permission to close the factory, claiming that it is running at a loss. The workers, however, deny the management's claim and believe the company is planning to hand over the factory's production to outside contractors in order to cut costs.

If the commission grants permission for the plant closure, 550 workers will lose their jobs. Unilever has already laid-off hundreds of workers and closed a number of its plants in Sri Lanka, including Walls Ice Cream.

Australian steel workers continue to strike

Workers at BHP-Billiton's Wingfield service centre in Adelaide voted on March 5 to remain on strike, after rejecting the company's proposed new enterprise work agreement. The 75 workers have been on strike for almost two weeks, after initially walking out for 48 hours alongside 10,000 workers from the company's 14 other work sites.

BHP-Billiton workers are demanding a 12 percent pay rise over three years and a national agreement covering all work sites. According to unions, the major obstacles to an agreement are BHP's insistence on a "no strike" clause and its refusal to assign the in-house superannuation scheme to Superannuation Trust of Australia, a 50 percent union-owned finance house. The strike at Wingfield is beginning to impact on steel supplies to auto and white goods manufacturers.

Bus drivers strike in New South Wales

Public bus drivers in Sydney and Newcastle struck for 48 hours from March 5 to demand a new work agreement includes a 27 percent pay rise over three years. The workers voted to strike after the State Transit Authority (STA) offered only three percent.

On the eve of the strike, the New South Wales government made an 11th-hour offer of eight percent over two years, declaring the workers' claim was "above and beyond anything we could justify or afford". Drivers rejected the offer and refused to cancel or shorten the duration of the strike.

Melbourne dock truck drivers defend wages

More than 100 truck drivers employed by Patrick Port Services in Melbourne walked off the job last week to protest against a proposed wage cut. The drivers are employed to move shipping containers around the docks.

A union spokesman claims that Patrick is attempting to force the drivers' wages down to the level it pays other workers. The

drivers are currently employed on an enterprise agreement reached with previous employer EA Rocke, which Patrick took over at the end of last year. Workers stand to lose as much as \$160 per week if they are forced into a new agreement.

Patrick is renowned for its government-backed campaign in 1998 to break the working conditions of waterfront workers. It illegally sacked its entire waterfront workforce and attempted to replace them with secretly trained strike-breakers.

New Zealand university staff strike over pay goes ahead

Up to 3,000 staff at Waikato, Canterbury and Massey Universities held a 24-hour strike on March 4 for an eight percent pay rise. The strike disrupted the first week of lectures of the new academic year. Most of the universities have so far offered rises of less than two percent. At Massey University negotiations broke down last month after staff rejected pay rise offers between 1.5 and four percent.

Staff at Victoria and Lincoln Universities, who also planned to go out on strike, dropped their action to consider last minute pay offers.

A spokesman for the Association of University Staff (AUS) said that rising workloads, fewer resources and inadequate salaries had left them no choice but to strike. The Vice Chancellors' Committee has declared funding restrictions make it impossible to meet the academic's demands.

Papua New Guinea dock workers fight for jobs and homes

Workers at Lutheran Shipping, a business arm of the Lutheran Church in Lae, are seeking a court injunction to prevent 40 of their colleagues being made redundant. The wives and children of the affected employees marched on the company's office on February 25 demanding a halt to the redundancies.

Despite a warning from the Public Solicitor's Office that the company may be in contempt of industrial agreements, Lutheran Shipping is proceeding with the layoffs. The church general secretary Fua Singin said that retrenched workers and their families could continue to occupy company homes, but only until the church council made a decision on the issue when it meets next month.



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