

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

16 March 2002

Oil workers continue protests in China

Thousands of workers laid-off by Daqing Petroleum in China's northeast Heilongjiang province have carried out a second week of mass protests to protect their living standards. In February, the company notified the sacked workers it was increasing their pension and health care insurance premiums to 10,000 yuan (\$US1,200) this year, up from a previously agreed 3,900 yuan, and abolishing a 3,000-yuan heating subsidy.

The protests began on March 1 when about 3,000 former employees stoned the company's headquarters, breaking scores of windows. After large demonstrations last week, up to 50,000 workers rallied on March 11 and over 20,000 demonstrated the following day.

Local police, paramilitary police and military units have now surrounded the building. Last week, the local authorities called for a tank regiment to be deployed in the city. Workers' representatives have warned that if the company does not back away from the insurance premium increase they will begin blocking traffic. The laid-off workers have established a union, the Daqing PAB Retrenched Workers' Provisional Union Committee.

According to government officials around 50,000 Daqing oilfield workers have been laid off under state-owned enterprise restructuring. More than 40 million workers have lost their jobs across China. Urban unemployment in the north-eastern provinces, once the industrial heartland of China, is as high as 25 percent.

Chinese workers demand unpaid wages

In a sign that the unrest in the oilfields is spreading to other north-eastern Chinese cities, a Hong Kong-based human rights agency reported this week that more than 7,000 laid-off workers from six bankrupt state-owned factories staged a two-day protest outside Liaoyang Town Hall, Liaoning province.

The workers claimed that official corruption was responsible for the collapse of their industries and demanded the payment of outstanding wages and the provision of unemployment benefits. Defying police, workers carried banners calling for the sacking of Gong Shang Wu, a senior government official in the city.

A worker from Liaoyang Iron and Alloy, which was shut down last November, said that government officials had sabotaged the factory by selling off equipment and skimming profits. They had also reneged on an agreement to pay workers 50 percent of owed wages before the end of 2001.

One protest organiser said that the government officials "hate our guts for doing this" and wanted to order the arrest of the demonstrators. "But they realised the demonstration had become too big and they would need to deal with us if they want to keep social order," he said.

Power workers continue strike in South Korea

Over 5,000 workers from five Korea Electric Power Corp thermal power plants in South Korea are still on strike after negotiations between the government and the power union failed this week. The workers struck on February 25 as part of a combined campaign with the gas and rail unions to oppose the government's plans to privatise public utilities and services. The gas and rail workers were sent back to work within 48 hours by their unions.

On March 14, the government issued a statement ordering the power workers to end the strike and return to work. Minister of Commerce, Industry and Energy Shin Kook-hwan warned in the statement: "We cannot continue showing unlimited tolerance. We are left with no choice but to deal with the unions according to the law and regulations." The statement said there would be "no more negotiations".

Dozens of union leaders and workers have already been arrested or sacked. The government has now announced that it will deploy 500 troops into the power stations to assist non-union strikebreakers maintain energy generation.

The Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), to which the power workers belong, has refused to call wider industrial action in support of the power workers. South Korea's nuclear power plants, which produce about 40 percent of the country's energy, are functioning as normal.

Indonesian bank workers fight privatisation

On March 11, in the midst of a nationwide protest by thousands of employees of the majority state-owned Bank Central Asia (BCA), the Indonesian government announced that it would delay announcing the sale of its controlling share to a private bank. The workers believe that complete privatisation of the bank will lead to mass layoffs. BCA currently has 800 branches and 22,000 workers.

At least 4,000 staff members from the Greater Jakarta area joined the March 11 protest, shutting down at least 119 branches. The workers marched from the bank's headquarters to the Indonesian Bank Restructuring Agency and then the House of Representatives building in Central Jakarta. In East Java, BCA employees protested outside the East Java Council, demanding the government cancel the sale.

In an attempt to head off further protests, the government suggested this week that the contract might include a guarantee of no job losses. It has refused to back down on the sale, however, which is part of an agreement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The government hopes that the sale will encourage leading US financial agencies to agree to ease the repayment terms on about \$US6 billion owed by Indonesia. It also intends to use the expected \$US450 million from the sale to finance its budget deficit.

Official sources confirmed that the most likely buyer is a consortium

led by Standard Chartered Bank or one led by the US investment firm Farallon Capital.

Indian unions call off public sector strike

On March 12, unions in the southern Indian state of Kerala ended a 32-day strike by 500,000 teachers and public sector workers after the government agreed to abandon its plan to cut benefits and defer salary payments for February and March as part of a cost cutting plan.

The workers are threatening to resume strike action, however, claiming that the government is already reneging on the agreement and moving to implement even greater austerity measures. The government has also failed to release all the workers who were jailed during the course of the strike. In all 250 employees were detained.

Australian air traffic controllers strike

Half of all the scheduled flights at Melbourne's Tullamarine, Essendon and Moorabin airports were disrupted on March 13 when 400 air traffic controllers and safety technicians struck for four hours.

The workers, employed by Airservices Australia, walked out after negotiations between the company and the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) broke down. The workers rejected a company pay offer of an annual 3 percent increase for three years plus another 3 percent linked to a profit sharing scheme and productivity targets.

Other disputed issues include a new classification structure, flexible working conditions and contracting out. A spokesperson for the CPSU said that the controllers would not "enter into an agreement where conditions will be eroded" and claimed that up to 1,000 jobs were at risk from outsourcing.

Carers strike in Melbourne

Some 3,000 state-employed carers for the disabled walked off the job on March 13 in Melbourne demanding the Victorian government increase a pay offer. The workers rejected the government's 3 percent pay increase offer as "a drop in the bucket" and "totally unacceptable". According a union spokeswoman, the carers are paid 28 percent less than workers in comparable professions. "Some workers who live in a residential setting on a 24-hour basis earn as little as \$6.25 per hour," she said.

The carers have implemented a range of bans across 400 work sites to press for their demands. Carers will refuse to prepare food, clean and supervise clients or shop for them.

Textile workers picket for better redundancy

Textile workers employed by the fashion clothing company Hugo Boss are maintaining a 24-hour picket outside its factory in Preston, Melbourne. The 118 workers, members of the Textile Clothing and Footwear Union, are striking to gain a better redundancy package when the factory closes at the end of this month. Some of the workers have up to 39 years service.

Hugo Boss announced at the start of the month that it was closing its Australian operations and consolidating its manufacturing base in Europe.

New South Wales bus drivers' union calls off action

On March 15, unions representing bus drivers in Sydney and Newcastle called off a second 48-hour strike planned for next week on the grounds it would disrupt special activities being organised for senior citizens. The abandonment of the strike followed a closed door meeting with the government.

On March 14, 3,700 angry bus drivers had voted overwhelmingly to reject the NSW government's pay offer and strike again. The government had offered a 10 percent pay increase over two years last week, in an attempt to head off impending strike action. Drivers are still insisting on their original claim of 27 percent over three years.

Following this week's mass meetings, opposition transport spokesman Barry O'Farrell demanded the government take action to avert the strike by either "offering more money" or by "cracking down on the union with fines, penalties or deregistration". He said that under the emergency services legislation, the government could bring in non-union labour to provide services in case of the strike.

Premier Bob Carr criticised the union leadership for "failing to persuade their members not to take strike action". A spokesman for the Rail, Tram and Bus Union Trevor Avery said that while the government's 10 percent offer was far short of the union members' expectations.

Refinery workers strike in Brisbane

Contract maintenance workers, employed by Transfield to carry out work at the Caltex refinery in Brisbane, struck this week to demand the company establish a trust fund to protect their holiday, long service and severance pay and other entitlements. The workers have been in dispute with Transfield over the issue since last December. The refinery provides about two-thirds of Queensland's fuel.

Queensland council workers strike

Over 50 outdoor workers at the Belyando Shire Council in Queensland struck this week over the council's refusal to abide by an earlier agreement not to replace permanent staff with contract workers. On March 12, the workers voted to strike for 48 hours but decided on March 14 to extend the strike for another two days.

New Zealand clothing workers walk off job

Clothing workers at Classic Manufacturing in New Plymouth walked off the job on March 9 after negotiations failed to gain any form of redundancy payout. The plant is due to close next week destroying 51 jobs. Some workers marched through the town and began picketing the factory.

According to the Clothing Workers Union, the company is closing the plant and moving production to its non-union factory in Auckland to cut costs. It is also outsourcing some work to China.

New Zealand teachers to strike over pay

New Zealand secondary school teachers voted last week for a campaign of rolling strikes during the second school term as part of their 10-month campaign for better pay and conditions.

The country's 14,000 teachers rejected a settlement last month agreed to by the union and government for a 3.5 percent pay rise. The deal also guaranteed a limited amount of daily "non-contact" time for marking and preparation separate from actual teaching hours. The teachers original claim was for 14 percent over three years, plus at least four hours a week non-contact time.

Industrial action will include an escalating campaign of non-cooperation with the new school qualifications system known as the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA), as well as bans on day relief, extra-curricular activities and meetings outside normal school hours.

The Labour-Alliance government has said that it does not have the funds to increase the size of the contract settlement and denounced teachers as "unprofessional".



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