

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

23 March 2002

## Chinese textile workers strike over layoffs

Over 1,000 workers from Guangyuan Textiles, in the mid-western province of Sichuan, have been on strike since March 13 over the terms of their retrenchment and severance pay. The factory is on the verge of bankruptcy.

Police have attacked workers picketing the plant, injuring several. About a dozen workers have also been detained. The textile workers have rejected attempts by the government-controlled Guangyuan City Trade Union to persuade them to end their strike action.

The media has reported protests by other groups of workers in Guangyuan over layoffs, including a demonstration this month by 20,000 workers who surrounded the government headquarters and blocked city traffic.

## Indonesian rail workers demand company president resign

More than 500 rail workers employed by PT Kerata Api Indonesia (KAI) marched to the company's headquarters in Bandung on March 19 calling for the newly installed president, Omar Berto, to resign. The company's board of directors and heads of regional railway stations were meeting inside the building during the protest.

Berto was installed as president in February. Amin Abdurachman, secretary-general of the railway trade union (SPKA), said that Berto was culpable for a major rail accident. He told the demonstration that Berto should have resigned when the former board accepted responsibility for the death of 30 people in a train crash last December in Brebes, Central Java. The union has threatened strike action if he is not removed.

KAI employees threatened to place bans business and executive class trains serving the Jakarta-Java route last month if the government retained Berto but the union leadership cancelled the action and met with the commissioners.

Berto has arrogantly dismissed demands that he resign declaring: "Please go ahead with the demonstrations. It's not a problem because I am still entrusted by the board of commissioners to run this company. I will continue."

## Workers protest against harassment in Indonesia

Over 250 workers employed by PT Sandang Indo Pratama staged a protest rally at the Municipal Manpower Agency's offices in Jakarta on March 19 to demand the dismissal of an

abusive production supervisor, Zakaria.

Employees carried banners that read, "Fire Zakaria now, all the workers hate him". One female worker said the supervisor had frequently insulted employees but company management had ignored their complaints. Labor activist Gatot Subagyo alleged that Zakaria had hired local thugs to break up an earlier rally by the workers.

## Indonesian tobacco workers protest for pay increase

More than 800 tobacco plantation workers from state-owned PT Perkebunan Nasional (PTPN) demonstrated on March 20 in Medan for a pay increase. The company, which employs 21,000 workers on plantations in Medan, Langkat and Deli Serdang, pays 279,000 rupiah a month (\$US26), far less than the legal monthly wage of 464,000 rupiah set by the provincial government last November. One PTPN worker from Langkat said he received only 250,000 rupiah after insurance and other levies were taken out.

A union spokesman said that company directors had consistently rejected workers' wage demands over the past two years. He said that the union had approached German unions to boycott the May tobacco auction in Bremen if the company does not increase wages.

## Pakistani education staff hold hunger strike

University academics, schoolteachers and auxiliary staff held a hunger strike in Hyderabad on March 18 against a series of sackings and transfers by education authorities. The protesters included university professors and college lecturers and teachers from high schools, primary schools and mosque schools. They demanded reinstatement of five sacked school teachers, withdrawal of charges against other teachers and cancellation of the transfer of two lecturers from the government degree college. The campaign was organised by the Sindh Employees Association.

## Indian tax office employees walkout

Employees at the Income Tax Department in Madras staged a two-hour walkout on March 18 against an attempt by the Central Board of Direct Taxes to violate seniority rules. The workers also demanded a promised revision of the pay scales for income tax inspectors and officers. The All India Income Tax Gazette Services Federation has launched a petition campaign and presented a memorandum to the finance minister over the demands.

### **Australian air traffic controllers strike**

Air traffic controllers in Sydney, Brisbane and Coolangatta struck for five hours on March 21 over pay, working conditions and safety issues. The stoppage disrupted hundreds of flights across the country. The controllers, who have not had a pay rise for 18 months, are demanding a cost-of-living increase. They are also calling for the introduction of a fatigue management system to guard against stress and tiredness.

Mass meetings voted to take further strike action over Easter if the dispute was not resolved, but their union, the Civil Air Operations Officers Association, cancelled these stoppages after agreeing in the industrial court to begin a two-week round of negotiations with Airservices Australia.

Airservices Australia is considering offering a five or six percent pay increase but is has demanded changes to work practices and entitlements.

### **Storemen walk out in Melbourne**

Warehouse storemen at Coles walked off the job for 24 hours and picketed the company's Westgate Distribution Centre in Melbourne on March 22. The centre supplies groceries to 132 Coles and Bi-Lo supermarkets in Victoria. According to National Union of Workers officials, 85 percent of staff are employed as casuals and were being paid up to \$300 less than workers at other Coles warehouses. The workers plan a campaign of rolling 24-hour strikes until the company agrees to increase wages.

### **Campbells workers on strike**

Production workers at the Campbells Soup factory in Shepparton, Victoria, are continuing strike action begun in early March over the company's decision to sack eight injured workers.

A spokesperson for the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union said that the workers had been sacked because they were unable to return to their pre-injury duties. She said the decision breached the company's workplace agreement. Campbells is seeking a return-to-work order in the Federal Court, threatening workers with contempt of court and damages claims if they do not end the strike.

### **Newspaper staff stop work over cutbacks**

Staff at Fairfax's Sydney newspapers stopped work on March 21 over the company's cost cutting plans. Journalists, artists, photographers and other staff believe that moves to merge operations of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, and the *Age* in Melbourne will lead to job losses.

A resolution condemning the cost-cutting plan was endorsed by a meeting of *Herald*, *Sun-Herald* and *Australian Financial Review* staff in Sydney and Canberra. "We find the stated aims of improving quality while making deep cuts in the budgets of the newspapers incompatible," the resolution read.

### **New Zealand teachers extend industrial action**

Teachers in Auckland are extending industrial action planned by the executive of the Post Primary Teachers' Association (PPTA) to include "rostering home" from March 25. The

teachers, who rejected a deal struck between the union and the government last year that gave them a 3.5 percent pay increase over two years and limited "non-contact" time, want a better offer. They will refuse to teach year 7, 8 and 9 students, who will be sent home. Successive year levels will be sent home on certain days each week until further notice. The decision to escalate industrial action was taken by the PPTA Auckland regional committee.

Teachers are also refusing to pass on marks for the new National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA). Students are having their work assessed but their results are being held back from the Qualifications Authority.

### **New Zealand university dispute goes to mediation**

The Association of University Staff (AUS) and Massey University management began mediation meetings on March 22 over a pay dispute. Staff struck for a 24 hours on March 4 and are now working to rule.

If mediation fails, AUS members will be asked to vote at the end of the month on further strike action and to withhold grades until they receive a satisfactory pay offer. Staff are seeking an 8 percent pay rise, but have been offered only a 2.8 percent for the year, followed by 2 percent next year. Last week, staff at Victoria University in Wellington rejected a 3.2 percent pay offer.

### **New Zealand bank staff stop work**

Financial Sector Union (Finsec) members at WestpacTrust, New Zealand's biggest bank, stopped work on March 22 to discuss industrial action. The workers walked out after reaching an impasse in negotiations for a new collective employment contract. The previous contract expired in December last year. A number of branches closed for up to two hours. Finsec represents about half of WestpacTrust's 5,500 workers.

### **Fiji workers sacked for joining a union**

Fifty workers at Pacific Battery in Wailada walked off the job on March 19 to protest the sacking of four co-workers just one day after they joined the union. Mohammed Buksh, a spokesman for the protestors, told the media: "We joined the union on Tuesday [March 12] and a letter was sent by the general secretary of the union to our employer. Our four colleagues were terminated on Wednesday as a result of this".

The workers believe the four maintenance workers were sacked because they had urged other workers to join the National Factory and Commercial Workers Union. The company is now threatening to sack the entire workforce. The union has reported the dispute to the Ministry of Labour and a meeting between both parties and the ministry was scheduled for March 20.



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