

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

30 March 2002

Korean power workers face mass dismissals in April

The state-owned Korea Electric Power Corp (KEPCO) dismissed a further 150 employees yesterday and is threatening to sack all 4,000 strikers if they do not return to work by April 3. The workers struck on February 25 in opposition to the government's plan to fully privatise KEPCO's five thermal power-generating plants and rejected a return-to-work ultimatum last weekend.

KEPCO management claims to have already prepared dismissal notices and is being urged to carry out the mass sackings by the government of President Kim Dae-jung. A total of 342 workers, mainly union delegates and leaders, have been dismissed since the strike began.

In a further attempt to intimidate the strikers, the government ordered 2,000 riot police to disperse a sit-in by power workers at the Seoul University on March 24. The protestors defended themselves with metal pipes and firebombs. Over 300 were detained.

On March 26, the 600,000-strong Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) said it was considering calling a strike in support of the power workers unless the government talks to the power union. A KCTU spokesman said the union would decide on April 2 how many of its members would strike and for how long. Since the dispute erupted, the KCTU has restricted its support to limited protest actions.

The same day, an official from the Federation of Korean Trade Unions (FKTU), the country's largest union body with 950,000 members, said it was "closely watching the power strike and how the government handled it" but "had no immediate plans to join in".

The FKTU has isolated the power workers, who initially struck alongside gas and rail workers who are also facing privatisation. Within 48 hours, the FKTU-affiliated rail and gas unions came to an arrangement with the government and ordered their members back to work.

Hong Kong communication workers oppose sackings

Workers at Hong Kong-based Pacific Century CyberWorks (PCCW) have voted to impose a work-to-rule, in opposition to the company's decision on March 25 to sack 858 employees as part of a cost-cutting program. They will only work to "minimum requirements" and ban overtime until management discusses the issue. The job cuts will save the company \$HK260 million (\$US33.3 million) a year.

About 200 members of the PCCW Staff Association staged a candlelight protest outside the company offices after the dismissal notices were issued. The PCCW Employees' General Union said its members union would join the association's industrial campaign, but warned that the company might hire contractors to counter the impact.

The management has promised to set up a \$HK40 million fund to assist the retrenched workers, but the association believes that this could be a signal that the company intends to carry out even more layoffs.

Last year it slashed over 950 jobs, reducing its workforce to 13,500. Industry sources estimate that PCCW will have to cut its staff to 8,500 in order to stay profitable.

Workers protest in Indonesia

Over 1,000 workers from two separate companies staged simultaneous

demonstrations in front of the Tangerang, Manpower and Population Agency office in Indonesia on March 26.

About 700 of the workers were from Korean-owned textiles company PT Indolim and were protesting against the late payment of a holiday festival bonus. The company had paid them only 40 percent of last year's Idul Fitri bonus, saying that it would pay the remainder later. The workers have not received any further payment.

Some 350 workers from PT Komenta Can protested against the company's contract hire system. They have been holding protests for a week. One worker Supardi said that most of the workers had been working for the company for more than two years, "but none of us have been made permanent employees".

Indonesian doctors strike for improved conditions

Over 300 casual doctors went on strike in Bandar Lampung, Indonesia, on March 26 to protest against late salary payments and to demand permanent positions.

Before taking strike action, the doctors demonstrated outside the Lampung Health Agency. The authorities refused to respond to their demands. Many of the doctors have been carrying out work bans since March 18. A union spokesman said if the government failed to act by March 28, doctors would go on a national strike.

Protest opposes victimisation in Bogor

Two hundred workers from motorcycle painting company PT SGI, staged a protest in front of the social and labor agency office in Bogor, Indonesia on March 25 over the sacking of a number of workers who decided to join a union. The workers stayed outside the agency all night. Agency officials met with a delegation the following day.

Sri Lankan footwear workers protest against lock out

About 750 workers at Bata Shoes in Ratmalana, 15 kilometres south of Colombo, are picketing the plant after being locked out on March 18. The management imposed the lockout when the workers campaigned for an increase in an annual festival allowance from 8,500 rupees (\$US85) to 12,000 rupees.

The management refused to pay the increase claiming that the company is short of funds. The workers believe that the management may have provoked the dispute because it plans to close down the factory and import shoes from the company's plant in China.

Pakistani fertilizer factory workers demonstrate against privatisation

Workers from state-owned Pak-Saudi Fertilizer in Mirpur Mathelo demonstrated in front of the National Press Club at Sukkur on March 26 to oppose the government's sale of the plant. According to workers, Fauji Fertilizer has bought the factory. Fauji Fertilizer is already listed as a loan defaulter and could collapse soon.

Australian meat workers locked out for three months

Meat workers at Cargill Foods in the New South Wales rural town Wagga Wagga remained locked out as talks between the management and the Meat Industry Union continued this week. The company locked out the 500 workers nearly three months ago in a dispute over the terms of a

new work agreement. The Meat Industry Union and company management met for four hours on March 27 and will resume negotiations on March 28.

Issues in the dispute include wages, conveyor chain speeds, increasing workloads and safety matters. The union said it had reached some agreement in relation to workers' rostered days off, but has not announced details.

Meat-processing companies across the country are moving to restructure working conditions as work contracts come up for negotiations. Workers at the Lake Creek Meatworks in the northern Queensland regional town of Rockhampton have been locked out since December after they refused to accept cuts to working conditions. The Lake Creek plant is run by the Consolidated Meat Group, which is owned by media magnate Kerry Packer.

Rail security guards strike over poor conditions

About 400 Chubb security guards who patrol trains in Sydney, Newcastle, Lithgow and Wollongong walked off the job on March 27. The guards struck after the company docked the pay of some workers for taking toilet breaks.

The guards have been asking Chubb and State Rail for two years to provide them with proper access to toilet facilities at the terminus and with decent meal room facilities. If this had been done, "they wouldn't have to jump off a train, in the middle of a trip," a union spokesman said.

Qantas unions continue limited protests

On March 27 about 100 Qantas maintenance workers blocked the entrance to Melbourne airport and marched up the ramp to the departure entrance. The protest action prevented passengers from accessing the short-term car park but did not disrupt flights.

The action was part of an ongoing protest campaign by the Australian Workers Union (AWU) and the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) to demand that the management negotiate a wage claim. The workers have rejected a management proposal to freeze wages for 18 months in return for a bonus tied to productivity.

The protest was the third this week. A spokesman for the AWU said Qantas had "refused continued requests to be involved in arbitration or reconsider union proposals".

Pipeline construction workers return to work

About 100 workers constructing a \$450 million gas pipeline between Tasmania and Victoria returned to work on March 27 after striking for more than a week. The workers, employed by sub-contractor Mermaid Labor and Management, took industrial action after the company refused to pay for airfares to and from the ship they were working from. The Australian Industrial Relations Commission ruled this week that the company was liable for the workers' fares and ordered it to pay back air expenses incurred since last December.

New Zealand bank staff strike over pay

Staff at WestpacTrust, New Zealand's largest bank, walked off the job on March 27 and March 29 over a wage demand. The bank workers are demanding at least 2.4 percent pay increase to offset inflation and improved leave provisions. WestpacTrust has offered to increase the total wage pool by 2.4 per cent, but will only give pay increases to staff that meet certain "performance" criteria.

About 2,000 workers were involved in the stoppages and other forms of industrial action throughout the week. Management suspended staff in the bank's south Auckland branches on March 25 after they refused to stagger lunch breaks. The Financial Sector Union (Finsec), which represents half the bank's 5,500 workers, said a 90 percent strike vote by the membership was the highest in the union's history.

New Zealand teachers' dispute escalates

On March 25, 2,000 teachers in Auckland began a campaign of wildcat industrial action and are refusing to teach selected classes each day. The Post Primary Teachers Association (PPTA) had planned rolling strikes to

take place after schools return from the Easter holidays next month, but most of the Auckland region's 105 branches decided to pre-empt this.

In February, PPTA members voted to reject a previous deal struck between union and government negotiators that gave them a 3.5 percent pay increase over two years and limited "non-contact" time.

Last week, the Labour's government's Minister of Education Trevor Mallard increased the pay offer by \$14 million, after previously claiming saying there was "no more money" for a settlement. Teachers also rejected this offer. The government has responded to the Auckland action by calling off further contract talks, saying it will not negotiate while teachers are on strike.

On March 27, about 200 teachers and students from the Wellington and Hutt Valley regions staged a protest vigil outside parliament.

New Zealand boat builders strike

More than 150 workers at Auckland luxury boat builder Sensation Yachts walked off the job on March 22 after the company refused to increase a pay offer. The workers want a four percent pay rise, overtime for working more than 40 hours a week and penalty rates for weekend work. The company has offered a 2.2 percent pay rise and to pay time-and-a-half after 48 hours work, but will not give weekend penalty rates. Those on strike include welders, steel fabricators, engineers, jointers, painters and electricians.

Industrial action continues at New Zealand universities

Academic and support staff at universities across New Zealand continued industrial action this week as part of a campaign to win improved pay. The action follows the refusal by university administration's to increase pay offers. Staff want pay rises of eight percent a year over three years, but so far most offers have been around three percent.

At Victoria University in Wellington, a 24-hour strike was held on March 27, while staff at Waikato, Massey and Lincoln Universities undertook other forms of action, including stop-work meetings.

At Massey University, where the Association of University Staff (AUS) has been involved in negotiations, union members met on March 28 to discuss a new offer. The AUS had postponed a ballot on further industrial action at Massey for two weeks as a "gesture of goodwill". Staff at Lincoln also met to consider further industrial action.



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