

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

6 April 2002

South Korean groups protest abuse of Chinese immigrant workers

Workers and civic groups protested outside Dong Ah Tire & Rubber Company in Pusan this week to denounce the employment of Chinese migrant workers under “unfair” labour contracts. The protestors chanted, “They are not slaves” at the factory gate.

Over the past eight years the company has recruited about 100 labourers from China to work at its plants in Yangsan, Pukjong, Onsan and Chinju. The workers are not only poorly paid, but the company extracts regular payments from them as a commission for bringing them into the country. To keep the workers from escaping, the company holds their passports and alien registration cards and deducts 150,000 won (\$US112) each month from their wages. Company management claims it will return the money when the workers’ contracts expire.

The company alleges the workers were employed at its plant in Shandong, China and were brought to South Korea to receive job training. A spokesman for the civic groups disputed the claim, saying the workers were directly recruited by a Korean employment agency. He said that each worker had to pay about 5 million to 8 million won (\$3,700 to \$6,000) to the agency and a deposit of more than 10 million won. The sum is equal to the wages received by an average Chinese worker over five years.

Hong Kong communication workers continue work bans

More than 7,000 workers at communication company Pacific Century CyberWorks (PCCW) in Hong Kong are continuing a work-to-rule campaign they began on March 26. The workers are opposing the company’s decision to axe 858 jobs. The layoffs are part of a cost-cutting program and are estimated to save the company \$260 million a year.

A spokesman for the PCCW Staff Association said more than half of the 13,500 strong workforce at PCCW was involved in the industrial action. The workers are refusing to work overtime and extra shifts.

Miners still missing after mine blast in China

According to reports in the state-run media, an explosion

may have killed 21 workers in a coal mine in central China’s Henan province. The blast took place on March 29 at the Xinfeng mine near Yuzhou city.

The *Dahe* newspaper reported that the explosion occurred when temperatures inside the mine rose beyond safe levels and ignited gas. A local official said that there were 33 miners underground at the time but only 12 were rescued.

Six miners are still trapped underground at another mine in Henan province, which flooded on March 7. This week, 19-year-old Yang Xianbin was pulled from the pit after surviving for three weeks by drinking dirty water. Yang was trapped along with the others when the shaft they were working was flooded.

Accidents in China’s coal mines took the lives of more than 5,000 miners in the first 11 months of 2001.

Philippine Airport Authority holds back employee entitlements

This week, 400 workers at Mactan-Cebu International Airport Authority (MCIAA) pledged to continue off-duty protests until management agrees to release over 200 million pesos (\$US4 million) worth of benefits owed to them.

About 100 workers staged a protest at the airport terminal on March 28 after the MCIAA board voted to ignore a directive from the Regional Trial Court to pay the employees a cost-of-living allowance, medical allowance and hazard pay backdated to 1999.

The MCIAA board has referred the order to the High Court, claiming that the regional court has no jurisdiction. The board is also claiming that since the Commission of Audit (COA) recently ordered that board members and management employees return \$US1.5 million in unapproved allowances, terminal workers’ allowances should also be scrutinised by the COA.

Sri Lankan plantation strike against privatisation

Some 500 workers at the state-owned Opalagala and Elagala tea estates in Rattota launched an indefinite strike on March 30 in opposition to the government’s plans to privatise the estates. Situated in the Matale district of Sri Lanka’s Central Province, the plantations are among the few still remaining in state hands. The workers fear there will be

job losses and changes to working conditions if the estates are sold.

Education employees in Pakistan call off strike

Members of the Punjab Education Board Employees Federation returned to work on April 2 after being on strike for 24 hours. Union officials decided to end the strike after education authorities gave an assurance they would increase salaries in accordance with new government pay scales. Workers have threatened to restart the campaign by April 8 if the agreement is not honoured.

Australian zoo workers seek parity pay increase

Animal carers and horticulturalists at three zoos in Victoria voted on April 2 to launch a campaign for a 15 percent pay increase, to bring their salaries into line with their counterparts in other states. The minimum weekly wage for a zookeeper in Victoria is just \$430. The workers are also demanding that the state Labor government increase zoo funding.

Stop work meetings at Melbourne and Werribee zoos and the Healesville Sanctuary endorsed a proposal for rolling stoppages and threatened work bans, including refusing to conduct tours, information talks and “animal encounters”, where visitors handle selected animals.

Senior keeper at Melbourne Zoo, Richard Kudeweh, said: “We’re supposed to be skilled workers, but we don’t get paid as skilled workers. I don’t know who earns this sort of wage these days.” Reptile keeper Jon Birkett, a zoo worker with 25 years experience, said: “We have staff here who are basically living from hand to mouth each month.”

Security company reinstates guards

Chubb Security has reinstated 20 security guards stood down for a week following allegations they had carried out “acts of violence” during a work stoppage last month. The guards provide security on New South Wales passenger trains.

The company was forced to withdraw the suspensions when the allegations were proven false. A union spokesman claimed that many of those stood down were union delegates and activists. “That made us very suspicious,” he said.

Over 400 guards went on strike for 24 hours on March 27 after the company docked some workers for taking toilet breaks. The guards have made requests over two years for proper toilet and meal room facilities.

Chubb and the State Rail Authorities have now agreed to provide access to clean facilities at four major Sydney metropolitan stations and country stations on the western line. Dedicated Chubb guard facilities will be provided in the major regional centres of Newcastle and Wollongong. Negotiations are still in progress for facilities at another 12 sites.

Pipeline workers demand travel allowance

Contract workers employed on a \$400 million natural gas pipeline project in Tasmania stopped work this week to discuss a dispute with management over travel allowances.

The onshore workers are threatening strike over the issue, following the lead of their offshore colleagues. Last week, 100 pipeline workers employed on the pipe-laying ship, the *Lorelay*, at Bell Bay, returned to work after employers agreed to pay a travelling allowance to and from the work site. The workers had been on strike for eight days.

The Industrial Relations Commission (IRC) has recommended that the travel allowance be extended to onshore workers. Other issues relating to pay rates are being argued before the IRC this week.

Timber company announces layoffs in New Zealand

On March 27, Carter Holt Harvey (CHH) revealed plans to cut more than 400 jobs from the 772-strong workforce at the Kinleith wood-processing mill in Tokoroa, New Zealand. The company intends to contract out maintenance and stores operations and will “reconfigure” production to make the mill more “internationally competitive”. The move will severely affect the central North Island region, where unemployment is already 10 percent.

The Engineering, Printing & Manufacturing Union (EPMU), the main union at the plant, claims it is preparing to fight the redundancies. Delegates have called on workers to “remain calm” while the union formulated a ‘battle plan’. The EPMU national secretary Andrew Little, however, has called on the company to “consult in good faith” and offered to explore “alternative ways” to achieve “profitability and operational efficiency”. Unions expect to enter talks with the company early next week.

Carter Holt Harvey, owned by the giant US company International Paper, is one of New Zealand’s largest employers and dominates the forestry and wood-processing sector. The company’s annual report, released this week, revealed that chief executive Chris Liddell received a 23 percent pay rise in the past year, bringing his salary to about \$NZ1.17 million.



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