

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

27 April 2002

## Chinese chemical workers protest over severance pay

Hundreds of laid-off chemical workers in Lanzhou, northwestern China, demonstrated outside the Lanzhou Chemical Industry Corporation headquarters this week. The workers are protesting over inadequate severance pay offered by the company, which has offered to pay only 1,000 yuan (\$US120) for each year worked.

According to an eye-witness workers have been rallying in front of the company since April 21, chanting slogans and carrying banners that read: "We need to eat. We need to make a living". She also reported there were several clashes between the police and protestors and that some workers had been beaten.

The protests in Lanzhou follow demonstrations in March by tens of thousands of laid-off workers in China's northern provinces, including protracted protests by workers in the Daqing oilfields in Heilongjiang province.

The state-owned China National Petroleum Corporation, the country's largest oil company and also known as PetroChina, runs Lanzhou Chemical. It has shares the New York and Hong Kong stock exchanges.

## China's mining industry claims more victims

Another 23 miners perished in China's coal mines on April 24. The workers were killed when an enormous gas blast ripped through the Huashan mine in the southwestern province of Sichuan. Four other miners were injured and eight were rescued unharmed. The state-owned Panzhihua Coal Industry Group operates the mine.

According to a report by the *China News Agency*, 7,000 workers were killed in the country's mines in 2001, 5,600 of these in coal mining. Industrial accidents in China rose by 27 percent in 2001, with 940,000 accidents reported within the first 10 months, claiming the lives of 116,800 workers.

## South Korean government blocks immigrant worker rally

Police in South Korea prevented hundreds of immigrant workers from rallying in Jongmyo Park in downtown Seoul on April 21. The government declared the demonstration illegal. Civic groups representing foreign workers opposing the government's plans for the mass deportation of so-called

"illegal" immigrants called the rally. The Ministry of Justice has ordered all "illegal immigrants" to turn themselves over to authorities by May 25. Immigrants that comply will be given until March next year to leave Korea. Those that do not will face instant deportation.

The civic groups are demanding the introduction of legislation to allow immigrant workers to live and work freely in South Korea. A spokesman for one group said that hundreds of immigrants had planned to join Korean workers at the protest but were forced to withdraw after police and authorities threatened they would arrest all illegal workers at the rally.

Many of the immigrant workers been declared "illegal" were once employed under the government's controversial Industrial Trainee system. Under the scheme, workers were employed by companies on low pay for two years and then paid nothing in the third year on the pretext that they were receiving training. Many employees broke their contracts and fled their work places.

## Korean electronic workers call for action against takeover

Unions covering workers at South Korea's Hynix Semiconductor announced on April 23 that they may strike against a tentative \$3.4 billion agreement to sell the bulk of the company to US-based Micron Technology. According to a report by a key creditor, Micron will only retain 85 percent of the workforce at the six Hynix memory chip plants it aims to buy. The deal still requires the approval and support of the creditors and shareholders of both companies.

## Indonesian garment workers stage protest

About 700 workers at the Singaporean-owned garment company PT Karwell protested outside the Manpower Ministry in Jakarta on April 19 to demand the company produce evidence that it had paid workers' social insurance contributions. They were also calling for the payment of outstanding overtime pay. A spokesman for the workers said that although the management had made assurances to address their grievances, it had not done so.

## Indonesian workers picket nickel plants

Workers have begun picketing two ferro-nickel plants

operated by nickel processor Aneka Tambang against an attempt to reduce pay. The company employs 1,440 employees at the two plants, which produce some 10,300 metric tons of nickel each year. According to a company spokesman not all the workforce is involved in the dispute and the loss of production has been “minimal”. The workers refused to lift the picket after discussions with company representatives later in the week.

#### **Indian power workers on indefinite strike**

About 18,000 power workers at the Bihar State Electric Board (BSEB) began an indefinite strike on April 23 for 28 demands. These included the payment of salary arrears, the payment of dues of retired employees and outstanding promotions. The day before, members of the United Front of Electricity Workers demonstrated at the Central Area Electricity Board in the state capital Patna against a proposed restructuring of BSEB. The company is being broken up into three separate companies—power generation, transmission and distribution—in preparation for its privatisation.

#### **Australian car component workers strike over agreement**

About 400 workers at auto component manufacturer Walker Australia in Adelaide, South Australia have remained on strike this week in defiance of the Industrial Relations Commission (IRC). The workers walked off the job on April 19 after the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union claimed management had “reneged on aspects of an enterprise work agreement” it signed last year with the company’s owners, Tenneco Automotives.

The IRC issued a “return to work” order after ruling that the strike may be “illegal” because it occurred after the work agreement had been signed and because the union failed to give a required 72 hours notice.

The strike has created an acute shortage of components at Holden’s Elizabeth car assembly plant in Adelaide. Auto parts for Mitsubishi’s two Adelaide plants and the Ford plant in Victoria are also in short supply. Tenneco has applied to the Federal Court for an order to stop the strike.

#### **Contract power workers vote to prolong strike**

Contract maintenance workers at the Hazelwood Power Station in eastern Victoria voted last week to remain on strike until April 29 over a potentially life-threatening health and safety breach. The workers walked off the job on April 19 after one of the power stations’ eight generating units started to leak hydrogen gas.

A spokesperson from the Electrical Trades Union said that although an agreement had been reached with the company to repair the leak, the workers have refused to resume work until all necessary safety procedures are completed.

#### **Council workers strike over contract labour**

Workers at Belyando Shire Council in Queensland went on strike on April 19 over the council’s use of contractors for plumbing and boiler-making work. Employees said the council had reneged on an earlier assurance that it would never use contractors in place of permanent staff.

While the council claims that it was only using contract labour until it recruited additional permanent staff, the dispute has dragged on for months. Late last year, 58 permanent workers at the council went on strike over the same issue.

#### **Locked out New Zealand workers accept pay offer**

Locked out workers at GeneralCable in Christchurch settled their pay dispute and returned to work on April 20. The 250 workers, who were seeking a four percent wage increase, were locked out for more than two weeks after refusing a two percent offer by the company.

Workers also rejected an increased offer of 2.6 percent on April 17. Under the terms of the settlement, they will get an immediate 2.75 percent increase and another 1.25 per cent in nine months time. The offer also includes a shared, one-off payment of \$80,000.

#### **New Zealand university staff settle agreement**

On April 20, members of the Association of University Staff, the Public Service Association and Association of Staff in Tertiary Education voted to accept the University of Waikato’s latest salary offer. The offer gives union members covered by the collective employment agreements a salary increase of 3.2 percent backdated to October 1, 2001.

Victoria University of Wellington staff are maintaining work bans in pursuit of a new agreement. They have accepted an in-principle 3.2 percent pay offer, but are disputing a number of management claims, including a variation to the term of the contract.

#### **New Zealand teachers suspend unofficial strikes**

Secondary school teachers in Auckland and Christchurch this week suspended unofficial strike action over their pay claim when the Post Primary Teachers Association (PPTA) returned to mediated talks with government negotiators. If the negotiations fail to come to an agreement this week, nationwide rolling strikes are scheduled to begin in early May.

The teachers have rejected as inadequate a proposed 3.5 per cent pay increase and the introduction of three non-contact hours per week for marking and preparation.



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