

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

26 October 2002

## Chinese clothing workers protest lay-offs

Over 500 former employees of the state-owned 3513 Military Factory in China's western city of Xi'an demonstrated last week against their sacking and inadequate severance payments. While some workers occupied the factory, others blocked one of the town's major highways. The protestors carried banners saying, "I want to eat, I want a livelihood" and "Punish corruption". Workers allege that the management sold the plant's land in July to a building company for a fraction of what it was worth.

The 2,800 retrenched staff were paid just 2,000 yuan (\$US484) for each year of service as compensation. The redundancy deal, known as "pay and cut", left the workers responsible for an annual 2,000 yuan health care insurance premium formerly met by the company.

The factory, established in 1949 to make boots and uniforms for the army, was recently shut after first being slated for bankruptcy in 1999. Its closure is in line with the government's drive to bankrupt or privatise the country's state-owned industry. The resulting unemployment has provoked widespread protests across China.

## More deaths in China's mines

At least 15 men died in a gas explosion on October 23 at the state-run Zhujiadian Coal mine in Zhongyang county, in China's Shanxi province. An official from the Shanxi work safety bureau confirmed the deaths and reported that another 29 miners remain trapped underground.

Last month, 13 miners are believed to have died at another Shanxi pit, after being trapped underground by a flood. The bodies were not recovered.

The Chinese authorities claim that the high death toll in the country's mining industry is the outcome of illegal mines being operated outside government safety regulations. However, a growing number of fatalities are occurring in the state-owned mines, where management is ignoring safety standards to increase output.

## Gas workers in Korea vote to strike

Workers at the state-owned Korea Gas Corporation (Kogas) will strike from October 28 unless the government withdraws its plan to pass privatisation legislation without consulting the gas workers' unions. Over 85 percent of the unionised workforce voted to support the strike plan this week.

The unions are not opposed to job losses or privatisation but are seeking to consolidate a role for themselves in overseeing the restructuring. Leaders called off a strike in February after the government pledged to enter negotiations over the privatisation.

## Philippine transport workers rally over fuel costs and wages

Public utility jeepney operators and drivers belonging to the Iloilo City Alliance of Drivers Association (ICADA) struck on October 21. They held a street rally demanding salary increases and a 2.31 pesos per litre cut in the price of fuel. The Iloilo authorities placed police on "red alert" and sent a large contingent of officers to shadow the rally.

## Sri Lankan Hospital workers on indefinite strike

More than 1,000 hospital workers in the North Central Province of Sri Lanka went on an indefinite strike from October 22 demanding overtime payments and transport allowances. Work in the two general hospitals in the region, Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa, has been paralysed. The government has cancelled all leave for hospital employees and delivered workers an ultimatum to report to work.

## Pakistani hospital workers strike

Staff at the Khyber Teaching Hospital (KTH) in Peshawar, in northwest Pakistan, struck on October 18. Another 1,000 hospital employees wore black armbands in solidarity. The strikers are demanding the restoration of incremental pay rises, a free medical facility for employees, preference for hiring the sons of retiring employees and other benefits. A union spokesman said management has refused to discuss the demands.

## **Indian power workers campaign against privatisation**

About 50,000 power employees across Uttar Pradesh protested on October 18 against a government plan to break the State Electricity Board into four separate power distribution companies. Workers say the move is a step towards fully privatising the state-owned company. The protests were the first of a series of planned actions.

### **Australian phone betting staff plan industrial action**

Tabcorp staff in Victoria warned this week that they will disrupt telephone betting for the annual Melbourne Cup horse race on November 5 and for other track meetings. Workers in Tabcorp's telephone betting rooms are demanding that the company withdraw cuts to work shifts, which followed the introduction of voice recognition technology. They are also calling for the restoration of other phone services that were cut to save revenue.

Tabcorp once employed about 600 casual call-centre staff during the spring racing carnival. According to the Australian Services Union, available shifts have been cut by 45 percent in less than a year. A union spokesman said this week that the workers were the lowest-paid staff at Tabcorp and that their income had declined by almost 50 percent over the past 12 months because of the changes.

While workers' pay is being cut, the company's executives have received large salary increases. Tabcorp's annual report revealed that its former chief executive and present director Ross Wilson was awarded a large increase in the past year from \$2.08 million to \$3.35 million. The company's general manager's salary increased from \$360,000 to \$507,000, while gaming managers' pay went up from \$773,000 to \$946,000.

### **Firefighters begin industrial action**

Firefighters throughout Victoria began an industrial campaign on October 19 over plans by the state Labor government to cut staffing levels as part of a new workplace agreement. The workers, members of the United Firefighters Union, have placed bans on administrative work and on performing tasks with inadequate staffing levels.

### **New Zealand hospital workers strike for pay increase**

Cardiac and respiratory technicians employed by the Auckland Hospital began a two-day work to rule on October 23 and struck on October 25. Radiation technicians will take similar action next week.

The 136 technicians, represented by the Apex union, are seeking a 9 to 10 percent wage increase. The hospital

claims it is running a \$NZ60 million deficit and can only afford to offer a two percent rise.

The hospital closed non-life threatening emergency services after the hospital board refused to agree to pay striking workers triple time to come in and attend to emergency patients. It now plans to call in retired and outside technicians in an attempt to break the strike.

### **Newspaper workers strike over pay issue**

Editorial production staff at the New Zealand newspaper *Whakatan Beacon* began an indefinite strike on October 21 in support of a \$NZ2 an hour wage increase. The Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union, representing the 14 workers, claims that the increase is in line with wages paid to production staff at other newspapers.

The strikers are picketing the newspaper's main building and handing out leaflets to the public explaining their case. The management claims the strike will not stop the production of the newspaper.

### **Lecturers campaign for salary increase**

Lecturers at the Wellington College of Education voted on October 22 for a campaign of industrial action in support of a 3.25 percent salary increase. The lecturers will start by implementing bans on all college meetings from October 25.

The union has been in negotiations for the increase since July but the college will not offer more than 2.5 percent. The offer is far below recent pay increases won by other tertiary education workers, which have ranged between 3.5 percent and 4 percent.

Students attended the lecturers meeting and expressed their support for the pay claim. A student spokesman said that the lecturers "are not being valued by the College" and "this would inevitably affect students".



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