

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

9 November 2002

## Workers demonstrate in northeastern China

Workers demonstrated in two centres of northeastern China on November 4 against retrenchments and official corruption. More than 1,000 workers laid off from textile and metal factories in Liaoning province rallied outside the provincial government building in the capital Liaoyang.

Among the protestors were workers from the closed Liaoyang ferro-alloy factory, who have not been paid any compensation since were laid off earlier this year. Liaoning province was the centre of large prolonged demonstrations by retrenched workers from March to May. Over 40 percent of the province's working population is unemployed.

The other demonstration involved 400 brewery workers in Changchun, the capital of Jilin province. They were protesting against the sale of land that had been set aside for a plant to provide heat for workers' dormitories. Workers said that due to a lack of heating in sub-zero conditions some 50 elderly residents and children have already fallen ill. They claim that government officials accepted bribes from private developers to sell the land.

Local government officials in both centres were under pressure to clamp down on labour unrest in the run-up to the opening of the Communist Party's 16th congress in Beijing on November 9. They have denied any knowledge of the protests. The Hong Kong-based Information Centre for Human Rights and Democracy reported that most workers they interviewed believe conditions will only worsen following the congress.

The government-controlled *People's Daily* reported last week that China's official urban jobless rate rose to 3.9 percent in the first nine months of 2002 from 3.8 percent.

## Korean government workers strike for union rights

About 30,000 government workers in South Korea struck on November 4 for two days, demanding official recognition of the Korean Government Employees Union (KGEU), which was formed earlier this year. The government declared the strike illegal under laws prohibiting government employees from joining a union and being involved in industrial disputes.

As the strike began, 2,000 riot police armed with batons

and shields stormed into Hanyang University to disperse about 1,000 striking workers who had gathered for an all-night sit-in protest. Clashes broke out as baton-wielding police waded into the protestors and several people were injured. According to media reports, about 600 workers have been detained for questioning.

South Korea's Labor Minister Bang Yong-suk threatened "tough punishment for striking workers," including prosecutions. The government is pushing a public servants association bill through the National Assembly. If passed, civil servants will be allowed to join only a state-run employees association and will be barred from forming a union. The KGEU claims the bill will prevent government workers from taking collective industrial action.

## Peak union ends strike over shorter hours

The Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) called an abrupt end to a strike by 120,000 workers on November 5. The strike, involving workers from 168 worksites across South Korea, was ended less than 24 hours after it began when the government agreed to postpone a bill to reduce working hours.

The bill contains a schedule to reduce the working week by four hours. While workers support a shorter working week, the bill cuts the number of paid public holidays and excludes part-time workers and employees of small companies. Even though the government has withdrawn the bill for the time being, it has not agreed to revise its contents.

Autoworkers from Hyundai, Kia and Ssangyong joined the strike for eight hours after refusing overtime the previous Friday and Saturday. Workers at auto part suppliers also stopped work.

## Philippines public transport drivers and operators protest

Public transport in the Philippines city of Bacolod came to a standstill on November 4 as striking drivers and operators protested against fuel price increases. The action was organised by the United Negros Drivers and Operators Centre (Undoc). All-day rallies were staged in various locations across the city and culminated in a major rally

outside the City Hall's Fountain of Justice. Large police contingents were present.

The drivers and operators are seeking fare and wage increases to compensate them for nine fuel price increases this year. They are also demanding that the government abolish the Oil Deregulation Law, which has sent fuel prices soaring. The latest price rise in October saw the cost of fuel jump by 30 centavos a litre.

#### **Sri Lankan teachers on hunger strike**

A group of volunteer teachers from Sri Lanka's North Central province are continuing a hunger strike (satyagraha) in front of the Education Department offices in Colombo. They began the protest over 40 days ago and eight of the teachers have already been admitted to hospital in a critical condition.

The action is part of a campaign by volunteer teachers in the province to win permanency, which will entitle them to a fixed salary. The teachers say they are protesting because the government has refused to pay attention to their grievances.

#### **Australian energy workers angry over safety issues**

Workers at Ergon Energy in southern Queensland are planning to strike over workplace safety after an incident this week that could have ended in a fatality. A city council worker in the rural town of Toowoomba accidentally cut through a 33,000-volt cable that was buried only 30 centimetres below ground, instead of the required one metre.

A union spokesman said on November 6 that the energy workers had "had enough" of the continuing safety problems. Workplace Health and Safety is investigating the incident.

#### **No increase in Victorian firefighting staff**

The United Firefighters Union in Victoria is recommending that its members accept a three-year enterprise work agreement and end a five-month long dispute over wages, working conditions and staff numbers. Firefighters have walked off the job twice since May. While details of the new work agreement have not been made public, the Metropolitan Fire Board has agreed that it will not carry out further staff reductions over the next three years. There is no guarantee, however, that there will be recruitment to replenish depleted staff numbers. Staffing was one of the main issues in the dispute.

#### **New Zealand steel workers strike over accident**

Workers at the Pacific Steel mills in South Auckland walked off the job on November 4 after a colleague was seriously injured. The strikers have begun a vigil outside the hospital where the injured worker was taken and put on a life support system. There has been no indication when work will resume.

The latest accident followed a tragedy at the mill in June when two workers died after a pile of steel fell on them. Two

more men were killed and another was badly hurt in an accident in 1998.

#### **Radiographers union seeks arbitration**

The union representing striking radiographers from the Auckland District Health Board in New Zealand is attempting to push their wage dispute into arbitration, in order to end the strike.

On November 1, Association of Salaried Medical Specialists executive director Ian Powell complained that the Health Board was prolonging the strike by refusing to take the dispute to arbitration "for what appear to be ideological reasons".

The radiographers have been on strike for nearly two weeks. Any settlement brokered by the union in the arbitration court is sure to fall far short of the 9 to 10 percent wage increase being demanded by the radiographers. The Board is already claiming it has a \$NZ60 million deficit and can only afford a 2 percent rise.

#### **Workers in Tahiti occupy building site**

About 25 employees of French building giant Bauygues have been occupying a hospital construction site on the Pacific island of Tahiti since October 31 against the company's plan to sack 150 fellow workers who have been on strike for 10 days.

The occupiers, members of the Confederation Syndicale des Travailleurs de Polynesie Force Ouvriere, have prevented non-striking workers from entering the site.

Police entered the site when the occupation began but were driven off by the workers. Talks between Bauygues and the union are at an impasse. The union has initiated legal action claiming the sackings are illegal, while the employer has lodged a case against the union.

#### **Fuel workers end week-long strike**

Workers from petroleum company SOMCAT in Tahiti ended a weeklong strike on November 3 after the company agreed to improve wages and retirement benefits.

The company is owned by Shell, Mobil and Total and provides aircraft fuel in French Polynesia. Airline companies threatened that if the strike by 18 workers did not end by November they would be forced to stop flying to Tahiti.



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