

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

22 February 2003

Chinese timber workers blockade factory

Reports surfaced this week that 400 workers at Lu Yuan Wood Products in Shuichang county, Zhejiang province in China, have been on strike since February 10. The strikers are protesting against the company's attempt to remove machinery from the plant, the loss of their company shares and alleged corruption by management officials.

According to one employee, their share holdings were transferred without their knowledge into shares in another company set up by the managing director of Lu Yuan Wood Products. They have no idea where the investment is located or how to access it.

The strike erupted when management closed down one of the factory's three production lines and attempted to disassemble machinery for removal. Workers have blocked the entrance and established a continuous guard to prevent company officials entering the factory. At one point strikers surrounded the company director and only released him after 40 policemen arrived at the site.

Workers told the *China Labour Bulletin* that the state union had done nothing to assist them, told them not to make trouble and ordered an end to the strike.

Indonesian aircraft workers stop work over sackings

Four thousand employees at Bandung-based aircraft manufacturer PT Dirgantara Indonesia (PT DI) walked out for two hours on February 14, after learning that the company planned to axe 3,500 jobs. The workers established a picket outside the company's main office.

The job cuts, which are designed to slash costs and drive up productivity, will be discussed at a shareholders meeting before the end of the month. Union officials do not oppose the dismissal plan and have asked the company to consult on the layoffs and to negotiate severance pay arrangements.

Workers went on strike in March 2002, blaming management incompetence and corruption for the company's financial difficulties.

Police attack Philippines miners

Over 100 police were mobilised on February 18 to break up picket lines outside Lepanto Consolidated Mining Company (LCMC), the Philippines' largest gold mine. Dozens of employees were injured and five were arrested. The mine is located in Mankayan, in the country's Benguet district, and employs 2,000 workers.

The workers, who are members of the Lepanto Local Staff Union and Lepanto Employees Union, have been on strike since February 1. They are protesting against poor working conditions, forced overtime and the contracting out of work.

Miners' unions are continuing mediation talks with the company under the supervision of the National Conciliation and Mediation Board. Agreement has been reached on seven points but the strike is likely to continue. One of the unresolved issues is the rehiring of 42

union delegates.

Philippines police bust banana workers' picket

Banana workers picketing the Lapanday packing plant in Sitio Mampising in the Philippines clashed with police on February 17. According to reports, scores of workers were injured.

The 400 workers, members of the Mampising Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program Beneficiaries Cooperative (MCBCI), have been maintaining the picket since February 12. They are protesting over a contract they signed 11 years ago, which leased 757 hectares they owned in the Compostela Valley, just north of Davao City, to the Lapanday Agricultural and Development Corporation.

Workers are demanding abolition of the lease. The MCBCI claims the workers had no legal council and were forced into the contract by the Department of Agricultural Reform. The agreement transformed them into company labourers with no rights to the land. The MCBCI is meeting with government representatives over the issue.

Sri Lankan railway workers picket transport ministry

Hundreds of railway workers picketed the Transport Ministry in central Colombo on February 18. They accused the government of starving the department of funds for general maintenance work and allowing the country's railway system to deteriorate. Railway jobs have been slashed from 25,000 in 1993 to 17,000 today. Workers believe the cuts are being made to justify railway privatisation.

Several departments have already taken industrial action. Gatekeepers at railway crossings, watchers and other workers associated with track work placed an indefinite ban on overtime on February 14. Managers from the track and bridges section held a sick-day campaign this month and did not report to work for three days. They also imposed work bans from February 7, refusing to carry out emergency overtime or work after 4.30pm or on weekends.

Indian bank workers hold sit-in

Members of the Indian Bank Employees Federation at the Indian Bank in the southern state of Tamil Nadu held a daylong sit-in (dharana) on February 14 at the bank's head office in the state capital, Madras.

Staff want immediate settlement of several long-standing issues. This includes a demand that the bank reformulate its policy covering workers' transfers, introduction of improved promotion for lower grade staff and advancement for part-time workers.

Australian airline workers to strike for pay increase

Ninety ground staff employed by Air New Zealand in Australia are threatening strike action from February 25 in support of a new work agreement, including a three percent pay increase and improved entitlements.

The dispute will affect the airline's operation in Melbourne, Sydney, Perth and Cairns. The Australian Services Union has already

given notice to the Industrial Relations Commission of the pending action.

In the same week, a strike by 4,000 Qantas flight attendants and staff in support of a seven percent pay increase will ground more than 30 international flights. No international Qantas flights will leave Australia from midnight on February 24 to 2pm the next day.

A spokesman for the Flight Attendants Association of Australia said “there is the threat of further action if members are dissatisfied with the outcome and we are expecting just that”. The flight attendants, who were forced to accept a pay freeze in 2001, are angry that the company is resisting their pay claim. Qantas chief executive Geoff Dixon just received a \$1 million bonus and on February 20 Qantas posted a \$352 million half-year profit.

Milk industry drivers strike in NSW

Dozens of drivers for Dairy Farmers—a major milk distributor—walked off the job in New South Wales on February 21 over unacceptable work hours and lax safety standards. A spokesman for the Transport Workers Union (TWU) told the media that drivers were often working “seven days a week, 28 days without a break and even 24 hours straight”. The TWU wants an Industrial Relations Commission hearing to sanction the strike.

Dairy Farmers management claim the strike is over the sacking of three TWU members early last week. The men were dismissed over allegations that they had violated timekeeping procedures. The union called no action over the sackings.

Distribution workers demand pay parity

Striking members of the Australian Services Union and the National Union of Workers from the Coles Myer retail chain rallied outside the company’s Bourke Street store in the centre of Melbourne on February 21.

The workers, who are from the company’s Altona North distribution centre, have been on strike since February 15 to demand pay parity with employees at Coles Myer’s Target and K-Mart distribution centres in Melbourne’s western suburbs.

Queensland plumbers and electricians continue industrial action

Plumbers and electricians working on construction sites in Queensland will strike for two weeks starting February 26. It will affect all companies that do not sign new enterprise work agreements. The strike will be followed by work restrictions, including working only nine days a fortnight. Bans will also be placed on Saturday overtime and work on rostered days off and on Sundays.

The latest action follows a two-day strike by electricians on February 17 to demand a \$2.64 hourly wage increase. Plumbers in Brisbane and on the Queensland Gold Coast went on strike for two days on February 19 in support of a 15 percent wage increase and a 36-hour working week.

Teachers hold more stop-work meetings in Queensland

Teachers from 18 schools across Queensland will hold one-hour stop work meetings next week over class sizes. The teachers are angry over the state Labor government’s refusal to discuss the issue as part of negotiations for a new enterprise work agreement.

Teachers face classes of 30 or more students, with many quitting the profession due to stress brought on by poor working conditions. Teachers at Sarina and Mackay North High schools have voted to strike for 36 hours.

New Zealand doctors continue strikes over pay

Senior doctors at the South Canterbury District Health Board’s (SCDHB) Timaru Hospital staged the third in a series of six-hour strikes on February 19. The doctors want salary increases to

compensate for increasing workloads. They insist that a pay rise is essential to attract new medical personnel and overcome chronic staff shortages.

Senior doctors are required to work onerous and high-risk after-hours emergency rosters but are poorly paid compared with those employed by other district health boards. According to the Association of Salaried Medical Specialists (ASMS), the SCDHB is in the best financial position of all the 21 DHBs in the country and recently received \$120,000 in additional funding.

The 30 doctors have already rejected a pay offer of 6.4 per cent over 18 months. Further strikes are planned for February 27 and March 7. The walkouts are the first by senior medical staff in New Zealand’s history.

New Zealand union drops demand for improved working conditions

After only two days of negotiations, the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) agreed to recommend a new work agreement to its members in 45 companies that does not meet original demands on wages and working conditions.

The agreement gives workers covered by the Metal and Manufacturing Industries Agreement a three percent pay increase over one year—well short of the five percent rise they were seeking. The union also dropped its demand for an increase in annual leave entitlements from three to four weeks and for improved bereavement and sick leave and higher minimum wage rates.

An EPMU spokesman said the proposed agreement was a “fair offer”. The agreement will be put to workers at 45 companies for ratification next week. If it is accepted, it will then be offered to employees at other companies and come into force by March 8. The current agreement, which expires next month, covers more than 2,000 workers in more than 200 companies.

PNG nurses strike for improved security

Nurses employed at the Port Moresby General Hospital in Papua New Guinea went on strike for 48 hours on February 19, closing down all medical services. The strike was called after a night-shift nurse was raped on her way to work. The nurses are demanding increased security arrangements for night-shift workers and an increase in risk allowances. The nurses issued a petition giving hospital management 48 hours to act.

Solomon Islands government employees demand payment

Solomon Islands government employees are planning industrial action after the government failed to meet a February 20 deadline to pay two lots of salary arrears. Currently there are three salary arrears owing. A walk out by public servants will affect a range of government services and international flights in and out of the country.



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