

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

8 March 2003

Chinese steel workers protest over medical care

More than 300 workers from the Wuhan Iron and Steel Group rallied outside the company's main office on February 24 to protest planned changes to the plant's medical health care scheme. The changes include a substantial increase in the employee contribution, which would put health care out of the reach of the majority, especially retired workers.

According to the *China Labour Bulletin*, unions covering workers at the plant instructed their members not to strike or join the protest. Union officials also visited workers' homes warning them against participating.

Strike ends in the Philippines

A month-long strike at Lapanto Consolidated Mining in Benguet ended this week after the company agreed to rehire 26 officials of the Lepanto Employees Union (LEU) and to other demands. Lapanto is the Philippines largest gold mine.

On February 22, the strike was extended after LEU members rejected a memorandum of agreement (MOA) drawn up by officials of the Lepanto Local Staff Union and the company. The MOA did not address key issues, including the reinstatement of the union officials. Other demands included an end to compulsory work during holidays, payment for unused vacation time and rest days, and an end to outsourcing.

Prior the latest agreement, signed last weekend, management threatened to sack about 700 miners if they failed to report to work by March 1. The management did not say why it had changed its mind, but it is estimated that the strike cost the company over 200 million pesos (\$US3.8 million) in lost production.

National strike threatened in South Korea

This week the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), South Korea's second largest peak union body, threatened to call a nation-wide strike on March 20 over an ongoing dispute at Doosan Heavy Industries & Construction (DHIC). Workers have been in conflict with DHIC since early January over the company's attacks on labour rights.

DHIC has drawn up a blacklist of union activists and instituted a program of "pacification activity," which includes deploying a small army of security guards to intimidate workers. The company also won a court application enabling it to claim compensation from workers and their families for any damages resulting from industrial action. In early January,

unionist Bae Dal-ho committed suicide by setting himself on fire outside the DHIC plant in protest against these measures.

The KCTU is not demanding the total repeal of the present legal provisions. It has joined with the Democratic Labor Party and with Lawyers for a Democratic Society to petition the government for legislation to restrict the company's claims for compensation to "damage caused by violence or vandalism" and to exclude workers' families. Even if the government acts on the request, individual workers could still be confronted with massive financial claims and penalties.

Sri Lankan public sector apprentices demand permanency

Apprentice workers in Sri Lanka's public sector began an indefinite hunger strike in Independence Square in Colombo on February 26, to demand employment as permanent workers. The 400 apprentices had been attached to several government departments after completing their technical college study courses. Some have been employed on apprentice conditions for as long as eight years. Eleven of the hunger strikers have already been admitted to the hospital.

Indian hospital workers oppose privatisation

Ward boys and other auxiliary workers at Bombay's Lokmanya Tilak Hospital in Maharashtra stopped work on March 3. The strike erupted after hospital authorities contracted out food preparation in the nurses' kitchen and transferred two workers to the patients' kitchen.

The strike crippled hospital services. According to official reports, only 15 operations were performed on March 3 instead of the 100-odd procedures normally conducted.

Municipal commissioner Karun Srivastava has ordered the hospital administration to cut the salaries of employees who stayed away from work. He also threatened to invoke the Maharashtra Essential Services Maintenance Act, to prevent the workers from taking further strike action.

Sydney Zoo workers strike

Employees at Sydney's Taronga Zoo walked off the job this week in protest at management's refusal to negotiate a new agreement for injured workers. The industrial action follows a recent management decision to force a staff member with 12 years service to medically retire due to injuries to her shoulder. A union spokesman said that the workers were outraged by management's treatment of the employee.

The workers are seeking a new policy that would facilitate the redeployment of injured workers into suitable positions within the wider public sector. Such arrangements are in place for many other public sector jobs. Injured zoo workers are only offered alternate employment within the workplace. If suitable work is not available, it can be grounds for forced medical retirement.

Due to the heavy nature of much of the work at the zoo, there are frequent injuries among keepers and horticultural staff. In December, 20 keepers suffered injuries that forced them to take time off work on compensation or to be placed on light duties.

Queensland teachers stoppages continue

A campaign of rolling work stoppages in Queensland schools continued this week as a dispute over wages and working conditions went before the Queensland Industrial Relations Commission.

On March 4, teachers at Fitzgerald State School in Mackay and Mackay North State High School stopped work for two hours, while their colleagues at Thuringowa State High, Oonoonba Primary and Kelso Primary in Townsville and at Brisbane's Redbank Plains Primary walked out the following day.

The teachers are demanding an 8 percent pay increase and a reduction in class sizes. However, Queensland Teachers Union president Julie-Ann McCullough said the union was prepared to consider dropping its pay claim and accepting the government's 3.5 percent pay offer if it would secure reduced classes. Despite the union's concession, Education Minister Anna Bligh said that talks could not progress while work bans continued.

Queensland building unions call off 10-day strike

Unions covering construction workers, plumbers and electricians on Queensland building sites called off all strike action on March 6, even though issues in a long-running dispute over new work contracts remain unresolved. The strikes began on February 26 and were supposed to last for 10 days.

The decision to close down the strike came after several major construction companies applied to the industrial court for an order ending the current bargaining period for new work agreements. Such an order would render the strike illegal under the federal Workplace Relations Act.

Builders Labourers Federation State Secretary Greg Simco said the union and building employers now had four weeks to conclude a deal. He claimed one of the "sticking points" in the dispute had been solved when the Queensland Master Builders Association dropped a demand to "cash out" 13 rostered days off (RDOs). The RDOs will now be allocated to set dates.

Union official Jorgen Gullestrup announced that striking plumbers would return to work "as a show of good will". He admitted that the Queensland Master Plumbers Association had not agreed to the union's pay claim of 5.1 percent. The electrical union sent 1,500 electricians back to work after accepting an industrial court recommendation to re-enter enterprise bargaining discussions.

New Zealand doctors' strike called off

This week the Association of Salaried Medical Specialists (ASMS) deferred a strike by 30 senior doctors at Timaru Hospital scheduled for March 7. Had the strike gone ahead, it would have been the fifth in a series of stoppages by the doctors over pay and working conditions.

The strike was called off after the ASMS received a new offer from management that it described as "genuine and serious" and a "significant step in the right direction". An ASMS spokesman said the offer was made in response to the "high level of solidarity and determination" by doctors and because of strong public support for their demands.

Details of the offer have yet to be made public. The doctors had previously rejected a 6 percent pay increase as insufficient to attract new applicants and overcome staff shortages. Doctors at the hospital are among the worst paid in the country. They are required to work weekend rosters and be on call one night in three. A stop-work meeting will be held on March 13 to consider the new offer.

Employment Court dismisses case against NZ university staff

The New Zealand Employment Court this week dismissed a case taken against the Association of University Staff (AUS) by Otago University seeking to have what it termed "secret strikes" declared illegal. The university alleged that during an industrial dispute in 2002 the association had breached "good faith" requirements in the Employment Relations Act by failing to advise specifically when strike action would occur during a series of rolling stoppages.

Following the release of the court's judgment, AUS branch president Mark Peters criticised the university management for wasting financial resources on litigation associated with collective employment agreement negotiations. He said that the university had spent tens of thousands of dollars trying to prevent union members from exercising their right to strike.



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