

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

15 March 2003

Chinese textile workers demonstrate over pay

Hundreds of workers from the state-owned Jiamusi Fengda Textile Factory in China's Heilongjiang province demonstrated in front of Jiamusi City Hall on March 1 to demand back pay and improved unemployment benefits. Last week the workers blocked the Jiamasu-Beijing railroad line before being dispersed by police.

The protestors were among 1,000 workers laid off last year from the factory, which once employed more than 6,000 workers but is now close to bankruptcy. Workers blame bad management and corruption. The laid-off workers are provided a monthly allowance of 120 yuan (\$US14.50), which is not enough to live on and is rarely paid on time.

Despite layoffs and closures in state-owned industry across China, there is record growth in industrial production. According to recently released official figures, production was up 17.5 percent in January compared to the same time last year. The increase is driven by the boom in sweatshops in the country's free trade zones.

Five die in massive factory explosion in China

At least five people were killed and 23 injured in a massive explosion at the Nanchuan Chemical Plant on March 10. The plant is located in Nanhai in China's Guangdong province. The blast was heard two kilometres away and left a crater 60 metres wide and four metres deep. No information has been released on the cause.

Workplaces in Nanchai are notorious for unsafe working conditions. In 2000, a link was established between the widespread use of low-quality benzene and formaldehyde resin in factories and high levels of illness among workers. Many employers refused to allow inspectors into the plants and blocked their employees from being medically examined.

Indonesian journalists rally over attack on *Tempo* office

Dozens of journalists demonstrated near the State Palace in Jakarta on March 10 to protest against a violent attack on the offices of *Tempo* news magazine by supporters of Tommy Winata. He is a prominent businessman and associate of Indonesia's president Megawati Sukarnoputri.

The magazine published a story explaining how Winata stood to benefit from a fire that destroyed around 5,500 kiosks at the Tahah Abangf textile market in Central Jakarta several weeks ago. According to *Tempo*, just three months before, he had submitted a 53 billion rupiah (US\$5.9 million) proposal to the Jakarta city administration to renovate the market.

The magazine has accused police of standing by on March 8 when several hundred members of the Artha Graha Group (GAG) and the Indonesian Young Bulls (BMI) movement attempted to tear down the gates to its offices. GAG is connected to Winata and BMI is a youth organisation associated with Megawati's Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle.

When representatives of the protesters were allowed to enter the building for discussions, they began hurling objects at *Tempo* staff. Two journalists were injured. Later *Tempo's* chief editor and editor were set upon by several of Winata's supporters at the Central Jakarta police headquarters.

Korean union calls off dispute

The union at Doosan Heavy Industries and Construction (DHIC) in South Korea called off a 63-day industrial dispute on March 11 after striking a deal with management during government-mediated negotiations. Workers have been taking action against the company's repressive labour measures. The dispute erupted in early January when Bae Dal-ho, a 50-year-old DHIC worker, committed suicide by setting himself on fire outside the plant. His salary had been withheld for months and he was dismissed for participating in a strike.

DHIC has agreed to end its legal efforts to sue individual workers for losses the company suffered during industrial disputes and to reinstate five unionists sacked for taking part in a strike. DHIC will now hold discussions with the union over rehiring other laid-off workers. In return, the union has agreed to end collective industrial action and suppress what the company termed "violent strikes".

Earlier this month, workers retaliated against security guards who beat up a unionist. The company employed a small army of security guards to intimidate its workforce.

Technicians at Ceylon Electricity Board still on strike

A strike by about 1,000 technical staff at the Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB) over a promotion scheme and salary increase has entered its second week. Civic, electrical and mechanical superintendents and engineering assistants walked out on strike on March 6.

The strikers are demanding the immediate implementation of the Middle Level Technician (MLT) promotional scheme approved by the government in 1981. Although some government departments have adopted the scheme, the CEB has withheld it and deprived many technicians of promotions. The CEB grants promotions through internal company exams whereas the MLT enables technical employees to advance on the basis of experience.

Sri Lankan hospital employees demonstrate

About 500 auxiliary and general workers at the National Hospital in Colombo picketed for an hour in front of the hospital on March 10. The hospital staff demanded a pay increase, a uniform allowance of 7,000 rupees (about \$US70) and a 1,000 rupee risk allowance. They are also seeking permanency for substitute and casual workers and the reinstatement of an attendants' training scheme.

The workers had already been involved in two island-wide strikes at public hospitals in December and January over the same demands. One attendant told the WWS that they were paid a meagre monthly salary of below 5,000 rupees and much of this went to pay off loans.

“The cost of living is skyrocketing. Most of us owe to money lenders. Our working conditions are unbearable. We have to fight, though we have lost faith in the unions.”

Nurses on strike in Sri Lanka’s southern province

Nurses serving in hospitals under the southern provincial council went on strike for two days on March 10. The workers are seeking the payment of overtime and risk allowances that have not been paid for seven months. They are demanding the introduction of annual salary increments and the implementation of a new pay rate recommended by the Kodagoda Salary Commission. The nurses also have grievances over the lack of decent hostel facilities and staff shortages.

According to the Public Service United Nurses Union, the workers’ demands were presented to the provincial council several months ago but have not been acted on.

Pakistani teachers demand reinstatement

Teachers in Dadu, in Sindh province of Pakistan, demonstrated on March 11 over the sacking of 250 recently-hired teachers. They demanded that the provincial Secretary for Education intervene in the dispute and order their reinstatement as no reason had been given for the dismissals.

Australian hotel workers strike for increased redundancy pay

Staff at the Millennium Hotel in Sydney walked off the job for 72 hours from March 10, calling for improved redundancy payments. The hotel is closing down at the end of the month and will be converted into apartments. About 150 permanent and casual staff will be laid-off.

The hotel management has offered four to 11 weeks redundancy pay, depending on years of service. A spokesperson for the Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers Union (LHMWU) said workers needed a better deal “because vacancies in the hotel industry were hard to come by”.

Over the past 12 months, disputes have erupted over job losses and closures throughout the hotel industry in Sydney and across New South Wales, including the Sydney Hilton, Top of the Town, the Rex Hotel and the Gazebo. Last year, the LHMWU struck a benchmark deal with the Sydney Hilton, allowing it to close operations and sack 500 workers in return for improved redundancy payout.

Victorian building workers strike over safety

More than 600 workers employed by construction company, Grocon, have been on strike since March 10 over safety issues on the Queen Victoria building site in Melbourne. Workers and subcontractors walked out after material fell from a high-rise scaffold.

A spokeswoman for the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) said the scaffold fall was the third safety incident in the past week at the site. The incidents resulted in safety notices from the Victorian state government’s work place safety body, WorkCover. A new enterprise work agreement is due to be signed between the union and the company. While the agreement gives Grocon substantial concessions, including increased control over working hours, the company’s directors are accusing the union of using the safety dispute as a bargaining chip in the final stage of negotiations.

New Zealand mill workers on indefinite strike

Workers at the Kinleith pulp and paper mill walked off the job on March 8 after voting overwhelmingly for an indefinite strike. The 270 workers employed by timber company Carter Holt Harvey (CHH) are seeking a new employment agreement. The current agreement expired two years ago.

The management has cut the workforce by more than half and contracted out maintenance work. It is now attempting to impose new

work practices. The remaining workers have rejected a salary package that would eliminate all overtime payments. The workers are demanding a series of pay rises totaling 11.5 percent, with the final 3 percent being paid later this year.

CHH is attempting to sue the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) for damages, claiming that two 48-hour work stoppages in December and January were unlawful. This week the EPMU pointed to figures showing record production at the plant last year and pleaded with the company not to “reward them (workers) by ripping apart their wages and conditions”. The company, however, insists the mill is “globally uncompetitive”.

Papua New Guinea stevedores ban overtime

This week, 600 port workers in Lae imposed overtime bans to protest the failure of the Labour Department and an arbitration tribunal to consider a log of claims submitted during a six-day strike last June. The workers, who are members of the PNG Maritime Industrial Workers Union, plan to strike next week if the issue remains unresolved.

The workers’ demands include the re-negotiation of the 1999 National Stevedoring Award and a review of a maternity leave scheme. The union has called for a new arbitration panel to be set up to deal with the case.

PNG workers challenge victimisation

Over 500 workers have begun a legal appeal against their dismissal earlier this year by Niuguni Tablebirds, a chicken processing company in Lae, Papua New Guinea. They were sacked after going on strike for two days over wages and working conditions. Men at the plant were paid an hourly rate of 80 toea (US20 cents) and women 64 toea. They were demanding a 50 percent pay increase.

Solomon Islands health workers strike for pay arrears

Health division workers of the Honiara City council in the Solomon Islands began an indefinite strike on March 12 over the non-payment of salaries and wages. The 43 workers have not been paid for the past 24 weeks and are owed a total of \$US41,000.

The National Union of Workers (SINUW) issued a 28-day strike notice to the City Council and Ministry of Health on February 14, but neither authority attempted to resolve the issue with the union. The Honiara health workers are among hundreds of public sector employees who are not being paid their salaries.

Guest workers on Palau protest over unpaid salaries

About 200 Chinese guest workers working for the Orientex garment factory in Malakal, Palau, have protested outside the offices of the local labour authority, demanding unpaid salaries and return tickets home. The workers have not been paid for January and February.

Orientex has shut down its operation, claiming the factory’s future is uncertain. The company has given assurances to government officials that the guest workers will continue to be provided with housing and meals until the dispute is resolved.



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