Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

22 March 2003

Chinese textile workers continue protests

Textile workers in two provinces of China are protesting over job losses and the non-payment of pensions and unemployment benefits. Despite cold weather and heavy rain, retired workers from the Tieshu Textile Group in the city of Suizhou, Hubei province, have blockaded the factory gates since March 12. They are protesting over unpaid pension benefits.

The plant employs about 7,000 employees and there are 3,000 retired workers who depend on pensions paid by the government and the factory. The government has now ordered factory management to declare the business bankrupt and is currently working out bankruptcy and lay-off procedures. The workers have strung banners across the gate declaring: "Out with the Woodworm". (Woodworm is a popular metaphor for corruption.)

In Jiamusi, Heilongjiang province, 1,000 laid-off employees from the Jiamusi Fengda Textile Factory are holding regular demonstrations and street marches to demand back pay and improved unemployment benefits. This week some 500 workers marched on the city government to demand it intervene in the dispute. Employees from neighbouring paper and sugar factories joined a march of 100 Jiamusi workers the next day.

***Tempo* suspects charged in Indonesia following journalist protest**

After a demonstration by scores of journalists last week, Indonesia's Central Jakarta Police have detained A. Miauw, one of five men believed to have led a violent attack by 200 people on *Tempo* magazine offices on March 8. The five are employees of businessman Tomy Winata.

The attack on *Tempo*, an influential newsweekly, injured two journalists and followed the publication of an article alleging that Winata stood to benefit from a recent fire at Jakarta's Tahah Abangf textile market. According to the magazine, Winata had submitted a 53 billion rupiah ($US5.9 million) proposal to the Jakarta city administration to renovate the market.

Miauw was detained on March 17 and charged with violating Article 335 of the Criminal Code by "forcing or coercing others to perpetrate violence". The offence carries a one-year jail sentence. Three other suspects, Teddy Uban, Yosef and Septi, were released after being charged with minor assault. The other man sought by police is believed to have left Jakarta.

Korean factory union excluded from negotiations

Information surfaced this week that the factory union representing workers at Doosan Heavy Industries and Construction (DHIC) in South Korea was excluded from the negotiations that recently ended a prolonged dispute at the plant. The agreement was struck after the government directly intervened in the dispute.

According to a report in the *JoongGang Daily*, the government bypassed the factory union and held talks with the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), Korea's second largest peak union body, and "a metal industry union".

The dispute began in early January when Bae Dal-ho, a 50-year-old DHIC worker, set himself on fire outside the plant in protest over the company's treatment of the workforce. Bae Dal-ho and a number of other workers had been dismissed for participating in a strike.

As part of the settlement, DHIC agreed to reinstate unionists sacked for striking and not prosecute individual workers for damages. In return, the KCTU will police collective industrial actions and suppress what the company termed "violent strikes". The KCTU gave no official explanation on why it supported exclusion of the Doosan factory union from the negotiations.

Indian bank workers strike over arrests

Bank workers in Calcutta, West Bengal, went on strike on March 17 to protest the arrest of Bank of Tokyo employees the previous day. The Bengal Provincial Bank Employees' Association (BPBEA) called the citywide strike.

Twenty bank employees, including BPBEA officials Rakhal Das and P. Chatterjee, were arrested while trying to stop authorities removing cash and assets from the bank. They were later released on personal bonds.

The Bank of Tokyo closed its Calcutta branch in August last year as part of its "integration of operations" global strategy. While some employees accepted entitlements and resigned, others refused termination and launched ongoing sit-down demonstrations outside the branch office.

Sri Lankan bus workers strike over unpaid wages

Bus drivers and conductors from the Mahanuwara Bus Company Kandy South depot struck for 48 hours on March 17 to protest ongoing delays in the payment of their monthly salaries.

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The workers have not been paid for February and outstanding January salaries are being paid in installments. The bus crews also claim that Employees Provident Fund (EPF) salary deductions were not deposited into the relevant accounts. The strike ended after authorities said they would investigate the matter.

On March 12, bus crews at Ruhunu Bus in Sri Lanka's southern province went on strike over the same issue. The strike was called off the next day when the company paid outstanding wages.

Volunteer teachers in north and east Sri Lanka strike

Volunteer teachers in Sri Lanka's northern and eastern provinces went on strike on March 11 demanding permanency, the filling of job vacancies and new school equipment. They also demanded the withdrawal of Sri Lankan armed forces personnel from school buildings. The All Ceylon Tamil Teachers Union said teachers would take stronger action if the government failed to meet their requests.

Power technicians strike enters third week

A strike by about 1,000 technical staff at the Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB) over wages and promotions has entered its third week. On March 6, civil, electrical and mechanical superintendents and engineering assistants launched the strike demanding immediate implementation of the government-approved Middle Level Technicians (MLT) scheme ensuring technicians were promoted according to experience.

On March 12, CEB billing officers held a lunch-hour picket campaign outside CEB head office in Colombo in support of the technicians. They held placards reading, "Strike continues if no solutions", "No to fake commissions", "Is CEB administration more powerful than the cabinet?" and "Withdraw the restructuring bill". The restructuring bill is to be gazetted on April 3 and will result in severe attacks on CEB jobs and working conditions.

Queensland teachers to resume rolling stoppages

Teachers across Queensland are set to resume one-hour and half-day rolling stoppages next week. Negotiations between the Queensland Labor government and the Queensland Teachers Federation this week failed to resolve outstanding issues in a new enterprise work agreement.

The government has rejected an 8 percent pay increase demand, offering only 3.5 percent, and given little ground on the reduction of class sizes. According to teachers, class size targets are 20 years behind current standards with at least 2,500 over-crowded school classes across the state.

Over the next two weeks teachers will vote on a 24-hour strike. The government is attempting to head off the industrial action by directing the dispute into the Queensland Industrial Relations Commission.

New Zealand mill strike continues

Striking workers at Carter Holt Harvey (CHH)-owned Kinleith pulp and paper mill called for support at meetings of timber workers at other CHH sites this week. The 270 mill workers walked off the job 10 days ago over a long-outstanding collective employment agreement. CHH management is attempting to impose new work practices after sacking half the mill's workforce. Pulp and paper mill employees have rejected moves to remove overtime payments and are demanding an 11 percent pay increase.

The Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) said it would end the indefinite strike when CHH management demonstrated they were prepared to "bargain normally rather than continue to reduce ...terms and conditions". The EPMU has not asked timber workers and other CHH employees to strike but called for "financial and moral" support.

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New Zealand steel mill faces prosecution over work deaths

Pacific Steel is to be prosecuted over the deaths of two workers at its South Auckland site last year. Gareth George and Raymond Watson died in July after a two-ton bundle of steel fell from an electromagnetic crane. The crane driver and Steelcraft Engineering, the contracting company, have also been charged in relation to the deaths.

Occupational Safety and Health has yet to decide whether to prosecute Pacific Steel over the death of Danny Campbell at its plant in November. Campbell was delegate for the engineers' union.

PNG court orders reinstatement of sacked workers

More than 200 employees sacked en masse from Niugini Tablebirds last month were reinstated this week with full entitlements. The company breeds and supplies day-old chickens to contract growers and buyers in the Highlands region and also operates a feed mill. The National Court in Lae ordered reinstatement of the workers, mostly women from its Seven Mile factory. The workers were sacked on February 11 after they struck for two days over pay, working conditions and safety issues.

Palau garment workers sue for back pay

Palau's Supreme Court has allowed a group of Chinese immigrant garment workers to be included in a civil lawsuit filed against failed garment company Orientex Palau. The company sacked the workers and refused to pay outstanding wages and entitlements, leaving the immigrant workers with no means of returning to China. The sacked employees are demanding a share of proceeds from a forthcoming sale of the company assets. Two hundred workers demonstrated outside the Division of Labour last week to protest the unpaid salaries and to demand return air tickets to China.

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