

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

19 April 2003

Government threatens legal action against Korean rail strike

The South Korean government has threatened legal action against a rail strike if it goes ahead on April 20. Striking rail employees could be charged and lawsuits brought against their union.

The government threat was issued on April 14, after a meeting of ministry officials branded the planned industrial action for improved wages and working conditions as “illegal” and “inadmissible” under the country’s labor laws. The Roh Moon-hyun government has also foreshadowed strikebreaking measures, including establishment of emergency transportation headquarters at the Construction and Transportation Ministry.

Mine disaster in China

China’s notoriously dangerous coal mining industry claimed the lives of 13 miners last week when fire engulfed two pits at the Dongshangcun Coal Mine in northern Hebei province.

Seven workers were killed when the fire raced through the mineshaft. Six others died from smoke inhalation when they attempted to rescue their trapped colleagues. The 13 bodies were recovered on April 10 and an investigation is being held into the cause of the blaze. Despite numerous investigations and government promises to improve safety, mine deaths have continued this year unabated.

Filipino telecommunications company to axe 1,500 jobs

Philippine Long Distance Telephone Company (PLDT) union members have rejected an Early Retirement Plan (ERP) offered to 1,500 staff at the telecommunications company. According to the Manggagawa sa Komunikasyon ng Pilipinas (MKP) union, only four full-time staff indicated any interest in the company deal.

An MKP spokesman said that he suspected the retirement plan would be used to replace full-time staff with contract labour. Despite widespread opposition to ERP, the union has indicated it is holding out for a better offer.

Pakistani gas-field workers on strike

Dera Bugti gas-field workers in Pakistan’s Balochistan province are continuing indefinite strike action in protest over the non-implementation of company agreements. Employees at Sui Field Purification Plant stopped work for four hours on April 11 in solidarity with the striking workers.

Under the agreement, gas companies are required to provide job opportunities for the children of deceased or retired workers. Companies were also responsible for provision of education, health, electricity, water, road construction and other vital services.

Union ends Indian hydro construction strike

Union leaders called off a 32-day strike by construction workers on April 10 at Baghilar hydroelectric project in Jammu Kashmir state after reaching an agreement with management. The strike began after JP Industries laid-off 1,400 construction workers without compensation.

Under a return-to-work agreement only 650 employees will be reinstated. The company has promised to pay the remainder compensation five times greater than is required under current labour laws. Despite

having provoked the walkout, JP Industries only agreed to pay 75 percent of wages for the strike period.

Sri Lankan port workers fight for salary increase

Sri Lankan port workers walked off the job for one hour on April 9 to demand a salary increase and improved incentive payments and bonuses. Unions covering the port workers organised the strike collectively. A union spokesman said further industrial action was planned if port authorities failed to respond positively to workers’ demands.

Government workers in Sri Lanka agitate against reforms

Employees at Customs, Inland Revenue and Excise departments picketed Customs Headquarters in central Colombo on April 9 in protest against planned Revenue Authority laws. Among the placards carried were, “Beginning of Revenue Authority is the death of welfare of masses,” “Closing customs and cutting Samurdi [welfare for poverty stricken]”, “Down with the revenue authority bill” and “No to amalgamation of Customs, Inland Revenue and Excise Departments”.

Vipula Miniwanpitiya, convenor of the united front of the Customs, Inland Revenue and Excise workers, said proposed Revenue Authority and tax limitation bills would stop the investigation and arrest of tax defaulters. Union members have warned that they will begin stringent industrial action unless the government was prepared to discuss the legislation.

Sri Lankan power workers on sick-note campaign

Thousands of Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB) employees held a sick-note campaign on April 10 to demand a 40 percent salary increase and oppose proposed restructuring of the state-owned power company. Workers also demanded payment of wage increases promised in 2000, abolition of salary anomalies outstanding since 1997 and opposed salary cuts imposed on CEB superintendents during a recent strike.

The Sri Lankan government has already passed the Electricity Reform Act and is preparing for its implementation. Under this act, the government will form six companies (initially government-owned) to replace the present CEB. Workers see this as the first step to CEB privatisation.

Shangri-La dispute ends in Indonesia

A long-running dispute between 80 workers and the Shangri-La Hotel in Jakarta was settled in the Indonesian Supreme Court last week.

The dispute began in December 2000 when 580 workers were fired after striking for improved working conditions, including fair distribution of service fees. While these fees formed a vital part of workers’ earnings, supervisors and management staff kept the lion’s share for themselves.

After two months management hired a new workforce, reopened operations and called in police to disperse pickets outside the hotel. Sacked employees demanded reinstatement but after months of isolation by the unions a majority eventually accepted severance payments. The remaining 80 workers rejected the package as inadequate and continued spasmodic protests outside the hotel to press for a better deal.

The final agreement with Shangri-La includes four years wages to each employee, substantially more than what was paid to other workers. The

hotel also agreed to drop a \$2 million lawsuit for damages against the union.

Qantas workers stop over job losses

Qantas maintenance and engineering staff in Sydney and Melbourne walked off the job for one hour on April 16 to attend stop-work meetings. The workers discussed company plans to axe 1,700 jobs.

Qantas chief executive Geoff Dixon announced the cuts last week, claiming they were precipitated by a sharp decline in global air travel caused by the war in Iraq and the SARS virus. Union officials said any decision to cut maintenance staff was “ill conceived” and would impact on safety.

Amalgamated Metal Workers Union national secretary Doug Cameron told the media that there could be industrial action if the company did not “soften” its position on the job cuts. The unions are due to meet with Qantas management on April 30.

Aged-care staff meet over sackings

Staff at the Eliza Purton Home for the aged in Ulverstone on Tasmania’s north west coast have threatened industrial action over the dismissal of two senior nursing staff.

Over 100 workers met on April 17 to demand reinstatement of the sacked nurses and to decide on action if the management refused. The Australian Nursing Federation and Health and Community Services Union has not revealed any of the decisions made at the meeting.

New Zealand mill workers renew picket protests

Striking workers from the Kinleith pulp and paper mill, supported by workers from other sites, resumed protests outside the Carter Holt Harvey (CHH) head office in South Auckland on March 10.

The workers have been on strike since March 7 over CHH attempts to attack employment conditions under the guise of making the mill “internationally competitive”. Nearly half the workforce was sacked earlier this year.

The company recently abolished a “buddy system” which ensures operators in its chemical manufacturing plant always have help at hand. CHH also wants to force production workers to fight fires, clean up chemical spills, and rescue each other in emergencies. This would enable it to disband its in-house professional fire brigade and cut “emergency response” service costs. The company also wants to eliminate overtime payments and a system linking pay rises with skill levels.

This week CHH announced that it had tripled its first-quarter profit and would do “whatever it takes” to win the dispute. Its \$NZ51 million net profit for the three months ending March 31 was up from \$17 million last year with operating earnings 51 percent higher at \$77 million.

Auckland company fined over death

An Auckland company has been fined \$NZ14,000 after a worker was strangled to death in a grinding and milling machine. The fine will be paid to Adriano Rodrigues’ widow after the company pleaded guilty to a charge of failing to take all practical steps to ensure the safety of an employee.

In November 2001, Rodrigues, a highly trained clinician, was killed when his tie was caught on the machine at the Orthotic Centre where he was working.

A nearby warning sign required employees not to wear loose-fitting clothing when operating machines. However, the prosecutor for the Department of Labour said it was inexcusable for the company to identify a hazard while maintaining a policy requiring staff to wear ties.

New Zealand mill worker dies in accident

A 55-year-old mill worker died this week after being caught in a log-peeling machine at the Juken Nissho (JNL) mill in Gisborne. JNL has had more than 304 notified serious-harm injuries at its three New Zealand mills since 1995.

In January, JNL was fined \$NZ10,000 after a worker was badly injured just five days after another employee had called for installation of a safety

barrier on the edge of a conveyor belt. It was the company’s 15th conviction under the Health and Safety Employment Act.

The latest death comes less than three weeks before a new health and safety law comes into effect. The law was strenuously opposed by employers and only passed through parliament after long delays.

Police breakup occupation by stranded garment workers

The Palau government has promised to fly home 200 Chinese textile workers sacked from the Orientex garment factory on the North Pacific island state. The decision follows the police breakup of a 20-hour occupation of the Crystal Palace Restaurant by the mainly women workers who believed the owner had interests in Orientex.

Seventy police forcibly broke up the protest on April 10 with one witness reporting that workers were “dragged out through the mud, and some had their hands bound”.

One sacked employee suffered a broken arm and was hospitalised. Several others were arrested and charged with disturbing the peace, trespassing, obstruction of justice and rioting.

The Chinese garment workers have been stranded in Palau for three months since Orientex’s Taiwanese operators fled the island owing employees about \$US600,000 in wages and entitlements and contract-guaranteed tickets home.

Solomon Island teachers threatened with reprisals

Honiara City Council is considering a resolution calling for a one-year suspension of striking teachers and termination of those who “spearheaded” the industrial action over non-payment of wages.

Teachers walked off the job on March 31 and are reluctant to return while the government stills owes them six weeks pay. The National Teachers Association Honiara branch called on union members to end the strike after the government paid one-week in arrears.

But teachers had called off industrial action on previous occasions after the government agreed to pay outstanding wages. These promises have not been honoured and teachers are suspicious of the government and the National Teachers Association.

Sepik workers push for unpaid wages

Six former employees of Sepik River Services Limited in Papua New Guinea have approached a Lae-based law firm to help them retrieve over 100,000 kina (\$US25,000) in owed wages. They have also notified the Ombudsman Commission.

The company was de-registered in 1996 and management of its assets transferred to the East Sepik government. Despite the numerous company agreements to settle the unpaid wages claim, nothing has happened. Approaches to the East Sepik provincial authorities have also been unsuccessful.

Fiji: miners call for an inquiry into the industry

The annual general meeting of the Fiji Mine Workers Union last weekend called for an independent inquiry into the country’s mining industry.

Workers are concerned about the increasing number of industrial accidents and have also raised grievances over the non-payment of increments for the last four years. The non-payment has hit mineworkers burdened by new cost of living increases following introduction of a Value Added Tax on consumable goods.



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