

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

14 February 2004

Chinese workers and retirees renew protests

Some 2,000 workers and retirees from the bankrupted Tieshu Textile Factory in Suizhou, Hubei Province renewed a campaign of protests on February 8 to recover unpaid benefits and pensions.

Employees have been demanding payment of all pensions, benefits and outstanding wages when Tieshu Textiles was declared bankrupt at the end of 2002. Tieshu workers began their protests in January 2003, after management refused to negotiate on a bankruptcy agreement. They also want full compensation for the funds they invested in the company in 1993 and 1997.

The new round of protests was provoked by an official notification, issued jointly by the factory's Bankruptcy Audit Committee and its Communist Party branch, reversing earlier promises that the workers would be paid.

This month's protests began with 1,200 workers blockading the local railway for most of the morning. Authorities sent 800 police to disperse the protest and block the arrival of hundreds more workers. The demonstrators were violently attacked and several were injured, including a 65-year-old woman. According to the *China Labour Bulletin*, at least 20 employees were detained and an army officer, who objected to the brutal police attack, was arrested.

About 1,000 workers have gathered each day outside Suizhou municipal government building gates since the confrontation. Police arrested another protestor on February 11, after he led a group of workers attempting to enter the town hall to demand discussions with local government officials.

Multiple deaths in Chinese mines

Scores of miners have perished in a series of mining accidents in China in the past two weeks.

Explosions on February 5 at two illegal coalmines in Shanxi province killed 29 people. On February 8, three workers died of carbon monoxide poisoning in the Zishanzi coalmine in Gansu province.

On February 11, another 24 miners died in a gas blast at the Yinjiadi coalmine outside Liupanshui city in the Guizhou province. A total of 41 miners were working underground when the explosion occurred. The death toll may rise as two workers are still missing.

Indian university employees sit-in

Patna University employees in the Indian state of Bihar launched a campaign on February 10 for a pay rise, improved conditions for casual employees, and better leave provisions.

The workers held a *dharna* or sit-in protest, which paralysed university offices for two consecutive days. Patna University vice chancellor and two members of the state parliament tried to appease employees by pledging to discuss the matter with the chief minister.

Junior doctors' strike settled in India

Junior doctors at Patna Medical College Hospital in Bihar called off their weeklong strike on February 11, after discussions with Laloo Prasad Yadov, head of the state's ruling party. The doctors were demanding an increase in salaries, full accommodation facilities and other claims.

The state's junior health minister, who persuaded a group of doctors to meet with Yadov, brokered discussions ending the strike. Yadov promised the doctors that a salary increase would be authorised by the cabinet's economic affairs sub-committee at its next meeting but gave no guarantee on demands for residential facilities.

Pakistan water and power workers protest privatisation

Water and Power Development Authority (WAPDA) workers in Pakistan held a daylong protest on February 11 against the proposed privatisation of the authority. After rallying at the Labor Hall in Lahore, they attempted to march to the provincial assembly but were blocked by security forces. Workers chanted slogans against the sale of WAPDA and condemned recent price increases for power and water.

Pakistan Wapda Hydro Electric Central Labour Union representatives addressed the rally and said that WAPDA employees would not accept privatisation. The gathering endorsed a resolution demanding the government drop its plans.

Australia Post workers walk out over restructuring

About 2,000 Australia Post staff in Sydney went on strike for 24-hours on February 12 against a planned \$120 million restructuring of the parcel and transport sectors.

Workers believe the plan, which includes establishment of a new high-tech facility at Chullora in Sydney's west, will cost jobs. The Communications Electrical and Plumbing Union claims about 157 jobs are already targeted. The union has accused Australia Post of being unwilling to negotiate or allow the Industrial Relations Commission to arbitrate on these

issues.

Australia Post has ruled out employees' demands that it replace casual employment with full-time jobs. A company spokesperson said this week that this was "something that we can't agree to" because staffing requirements were "dependent upon things like customer demand and operational requirements".

Cannery workers strike

Over 800 workers walked off the job at SPC Ardmona's canning plants in the Victorian towns of Shepparton and Mooroopna on February 12. The strike erupted after negotiations for improved wages and conditions broke down. The strike is occurring at the peak of the fruit harvest and could have a major impact. Faced with growers' concerns that fruit will rot before it is processed, SPC management says it has contingency plans to circumvent the strike and maintain production.

Workers strike over construction site death

About 200 building workers at three Gold Coast construction sites in Queensland walked off the job on February 11 after a rigger fell to his death the day before. Trevor Kelly, 46, was working at a convention centre project repairing water-damaged roofing when he stepped on a soft layer of the roof and plunged 15 metres to his death. He is the third worker to be killed on Gold Coast building sites in the past five months.

New Zealand nurses union calls off strike

A strike notice issued by the NZ Nurses Organisation (NZNO) for February 13 was withdrawn last week after the union and employers agreed on the terms of a settlement. The NZNO is not releasing any details of the proposed deal before membership meetings this coming week.

Some 4,000 nurses employed by seven regional North Island District Health Boards had voted to strike for four hours for pay increases of between 9 and 15 percent, aimed at bringing their pay rates into line with nurses in the Auckland region.

Bank of New Zealand call centre staff picket over pay

Bank of New Zealand (BNZ) call centre staff walked out of negotiations last week and picketed the Auckland BNZ tower after the bank refused to increase a pay offer. The BNZ is owned by the National Australia Bank (NAB), which is currently embroiled in a scandal over insider trading losses. One of the picket signs read: "Frank Cicutto [the NAB's recently-resigned CEO] gets millions, BNZ staff get peanuts".

It is the third time since December BNZ Customer Contact Centre workers have taken industrial action. The dispute is over increasing workloads and BNZ's refusal to increase pay for more complex work. In 2002, the bank agreed to review job roles and, after a year's delay, released some limited information confirming that workloads had increased. The bank, however, did not adjust pay. Before Christmas, the BNZ offered non-unionised workers at the call centre a 3.5 percent pay rise previously rejected as inadequate by union members.

New Zealand polytechnics contract settled

Staff at six New Zealand polytechnics voted this week on a new collective employment agreement. The agreement ends a protracted dispute involving 23 days of negotiations and several days of strike action.

The new agreement provides standardised conditions of employment at all the schools. Staff covered by the agreement will receive pay increases of between 3 and 5.5 percent over two years, backdated to March 2003. The proposed agreement covers staff at UNITEC, Waikato Institute of Technology, Northland Polytechnic, Whitireia Community Polytechnic, the Western Institute of Technology at Taranaki, and Bay of Plenty Polytechnic.

PNG steel company continues sackings

Port Moresby-based Atlas Steel in Papua New Guinea has now dismissed a total of 30 workers over the last three weeks. On January 20, 100 employees at the company walked off the job over the sacking of 19 workers a week earlier. When employees returned to work a week later, 11 more were terminated.

The workers have been in a dispute with the company over its refusal to discuss a log-of-claims submitted in January 2001. The Amalgamated General Workers Union has called for talks with government and employer representatives.

Air Niugini flight attendants vote to strike

Flight attendants employed by Papua New Guinea's state-owned Air Niugini voted on February 6 to strike over employment conditions. The Air Niugini Flight Attendants Association reported that 74 of the 92 unionised workers voted for strike action. Air Niugini employs a total of 120 flight attendants.

The attendants are demanding reinstatement of two recently sacked union members, payment of a meal allowance on international flights, single room hotel accommodation for unmarried mothers, and guaranteed positions for attendants after they have been employed for six months.



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