

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

5 March 2005

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Asia

Workers in China fight pay cut

According to a report in the *Apple Daily*, 1,000 workers from Tianshi, a Hong Kong-owned printing factory in Shenzhen, demonstrated on February 26 against an arbitrary pay reduction and cuts to working conditions. Shenzhen, a Special Economic Zone in China's southern Guangdong province, is notorious for the brutal exploitation of labour.

While management increased the monthly wage from 380 yuan (about \$US46) to 480 yuan, the company withdrew the provision of free food and accommodation. Instead, workers were to be charged 150 yuan for these services. Working hours were also set to increase from 8 to 10 hours daily.

Workers protested outside the local government office and attempted to block a major highway to draw public attention to their grievances. Local government officials responded by calling in 200 riot police backed by security guards to break up the demonstration. Several workers were arrested.

The demonstrators returned to work in the afternoon, after local government officials persuaded the company to drop its new policy. One female employee said that although the company provides food and accommodation, both were very bad.

Redundant workers demand pensions and benefits

More than 200 redundant workers in Funing County, in China's Jiangsu province, protested on March 2 outside county government offices in Yancheng City. They were opposing the lack of pensions, healthcare and other benefits. The protestors represented workers laid-off from 30 bankrupt state-owned enterprises, including farming machinery plants, meat processors, and silk and fertiliser manufacturers.

While the Chinese government has formally ruled that restructured enterprises must establish a social security fund to meet the needs of laid-off workers, local authorities claim no such regulation exists. Many state-owned enterprises now on the verge of bankruptcy claim they cannot even pay basic wages, let alone provide for social security.

Workers from at least 90 state-owned plants in Yancheng City face similar problems. Employed for decades in these enterprises they are now deprived of a pension and face abject poverty. Many local workers have attempted to travel to Beijing to protest over their treatment but are under constant police surveillance. Several workers' representatives have been reportedly arrested.

Airline workers continue protests over outsourcing

This week the union representing more than 20,000 Thai Airlines (THAI) employees threatened court action against the airline's plans to outsource recruitment of cabin crew and other staff. A union spokesman said that the contract awarded by THAI to Siam Rajathance Co., to recruit new temporary staff would not save money and threatened permanent career paths and jobs.

Workers protesting outside the company's Bangkok headquarters the

previous week also opposed the airline turning over four key routes to Thai AirAsia, which is half-owned by Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's family business.

Sri Lankan workers and students oppose privatisation

A series of protests by workers and students were held in Sri Lanka's capital Colombo on March 2 against the United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA) government's privatisation and outsourcing plans. Members of the Medical Faculty Students Action Committee (MFSAC) demonstrated outside the Colombo Medical Faculty against the government's recent moves to allow private institutions to issue higher education degrees.

A spokesman for the Colombo Medical Faculty Student Union warned that the government plans would undermine medical professional standards and that the Education Ministry did not have authority to supervise the operations of private education establishments.

Workers from the State Engineering Corporation of Sri Lanka (SEC) marched to the prime minister's office to present a petition denouncing the government's "bias towards private companies" for post-tsunami reconstruction. A spokesman for the Corporation, Co-operative and Mercantile Union (CCMU), which covers the workers, said that the authorities were "conspiring against the government sector". Sri Lanka's largest public engineering institute, the SLEC, was not offered any reconstruction work, the spokesman said. CCMU workers are also demanding a 2,500-rupee pay increase promised in last November's budget.

Members of the Inland Revenue Services Union (IRSU) also protested in the city against what a spokesman said were "moves to turn the Inland Revenue Department into an Authority or another institution". Tax workers view the development as a step towards privatisation.

Sri Lankan hotel workers demand allowance

About 1,000 hotel-workers who lost their jobs when their work places were destroyed by the December 26 tsunami marched through Colombo on February 25. They picketed the Ceylon Tourist Board and presented a petition demanding a living allowance until they regained employment. More than 1,500 hotel workers were made unemployed and many lost their homes in the disaster. Some employees, however, believe that hotel owners are using the tsunami as an excuse to slash staff numbers.

Meanwhile, around 800 workers from the hotels in the Bentota and Beruwala tourist areas in the south west of the country campaigned in Galle Road, Moragalla to demand a 5,000-rupee (\$US50) allowance to supplement existing salaries which they say are grossly insufficient. About 70 percent of hotel employees in the two districts receive only 3,500 rupees (\$US35) per month.

Indian communication workers oppose privatisation

On March 1, executive-level communications workers from the state-owned Bharat Sanchar Nigam Limited (BSNL) protested outside the Telephone Exchange in Bhavan in the southern Indian state of Pathanamhitta. The workers—members of the Sanchar Nigam Executives Association India, All-India BSNL Executives Association and BSNL Employees Union—were opposing the government's privatisation plan

which allows 74 percent foreign investment in the telecommunication sector.

Last month, BSNL executive-level workers in several states demonstrated in front of company offices over the non-implementation of pay scales and promotions previously agreed to by the government. Further protests are planned later this month.

Australia and the Pacific

Contract workers continue refinery strike

A strike by about 430 contract workers at BHP Billiton's Worsley alumina refinery in Collie, in the southwest of Western Australia is continuing. The workers, who are members of the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) and the Construction Forestry Mining and Electrical Union (CFMEU), walked off the job a month ago demanding construction rates of pay while the refinery is being expanded. They are currently paid as maintenance staff and want an increase of approximately \$A200 (\$US157) a week.

The majority of the strikers belong to the AMWU, but over 50 are CFMEU members. Most are employed under the federal awards system. On March 1, the Federal Court ordered 66 of the strikers to return to work, but a mass meeting resolved unanimously to stay out. Contracting companies have threatened the workers that they could face individual fines of up to \$2,000 for breaching the on-site maintenance agreement.

About 400 members of the Maritime Union of Australia and the CMFEU in Perth and Fremantle this week travelled 200 kilometres to join the Collie picket line. The unions have not specified how long the 400 men will remain in Collie but the MUA said it was "leaving a skeleton staff to keep the shipping moving." The workers risk being fined under the Howard government's Workplace Relations Act secondary boycott provisions for joining a strike not directly related to their place of work.

Health workers walk out over unhygienic conditions

On March 2, over 100 nurses, kitchen staff and theatre technicians walked off the job at Box Hill Hospital in Melbourne, Victoria, to protest against unhygienic and unclean conditions. A spokesman for the Health Services Union said that further strikes at Box Hill and at other major hospitals—the Alfred, Royal Women's and Mercy hospitals, as well as the Peter MacCallum Cancer Centre—could take action in the next two weeks.

A union survey of 154 workers at Box Hill and Alfred hospitals revealed that employees were extremely concerned about the prevailing unhygienic conditions, which included blood and other matter on hospital equipment, dirty birthing and post-natal rooms, filthy toilets and the presence of rats near a hospital kiosk.

According to a union spokesman, the problems occurred because private cleaning companies contracted by the Victoria State Labor government were "cutting corners and standards are not met". He said this put "patients and medical staff at risk".

Despite the survey, Eastern Health is pressing ahead with contracting-out cleaning and other services at other hospitals. After contemptuously dismissing the concerns of Box Hill Hospital employees as "a publicity stunt", Eastern Health human resources general manager Graeme Kelly announced that contracts for cleaning, gardening, catering and ward support at Maroondah Hospital "will be tendered within months". This could see a 10 percent staff cut at the hospital.

State Health Minister Bronwyn Pike denied that outsourcing cleaning had led to a drop in hygiene standards. She claimed that the Alfred and Box Hill hospitals "passed a patient satisfaction survey with flying colours".

South Australian power workers step up campaign

About 400 power workers from ETSA Utilities in South Australia voted last weekend to intensify work bans in protest over negotiations for a new enterprise work agreement. Workers had already rejected a company offer on pay and conditions made in December.

Current bans include electricians refusing to work outside of local areas,

no participation in training programs and bans on mobile phone use for work purposes. Bans on disconnecting power for non-payment of electricity bills and intra-state work have been in place since last December. The workers, who are members of the Electric Trades Union, will meet in two weeks time to discuss further industrial action.

New Zealand cold store employees strike over pay

Workers at Nelson Coldstore in New Zealand walked off the job and picketed for three hours on February 28 in the first strike for a national combined unions' claim for a 5 percent pay increase. About 14 members of the Service and Food Workers' Union (SFWU), a quarter of the total workforce, took part in the action.

Workers at the cold store—a distribution centre for fish and vegetables—were already involved in a pay dispute and up until last week were demanding a 20 percent wage increase. This claim, however, has since been dropped. The fact that the SFWU is now backing the national campaign indicates that it intends to suppress any demands from members above 5 percent.

An SFWU spokesman said, "No one should expect less than a 5 percent pay rise". The Labour Party's Nelson candidate for this year's coming election Jen McCutcheon, a former teachers' union president, said the strike was "a bit premature".

New Zealand university staff seek salary boost

Academic staff at New Zealand's main universities are expected to endorse a salary claim of up to 30 percent over three years. General (non-academic) staff are also expected to back a claim for a 16 percent pay increase over the same period. Pay negotiations with university employers are due to commence soon.

Union members will vote on the claims at meetings in seven universities covered by the new national collective employment agreements for academic and general staff in the next fortnight.

The academic salary claim is based on comparisons with the major Australian universities and other teaching groups in New Zealand. Salaries in New Zealand lag behind those in Australian universities by as much as 22 percent, while higher superannuation and leave benefits give the Australian academics a further margin of at least 11 percent.

New Zealand workers compensated for chemical poisoning

After two decades, the New Zealand Accident Compensation Corporation (ACC) has now accepted the compensation claims of two workers affected by workplace exposure to dioxin. The two, along with four others, finally underwent medical examinations last year as part of the fight to have their conditions officially recognised. All six allege that they became ill through workplace exposure at the New Plymouth-based Ivon Watkins-Dow chemical plant.

In September, the Health Ministry said that tests had shown some long-term residents in the New Plymouth suburb of Paritutu had a higher than normal level of dioxin in their blood. Ivon Watkins-Dow (now Dow AgroSciences) made the pesticide 2,4,5-T from 1960 until the 1980s at the plant. Paritutu residents have long claimed emissions from the plant caused a variety of diseases.

The claims by the six former workers were assessed by ACC's PCP/Dioxin Panel, which has been considering claims since 1997 by employees who had handled chemicals containing dioxin such as PCP. The panel found that there was insufficient medical evidence of causal links in the four cases. Five more former workers are about to undergo ACC medical examinations.

Roy Drake, although one of the unsuccessful claimants, said that he was pleased that a government department had finally recognised dioxin exposure. The ACC has stringent criteria. For claims to be accepted the personal injury must be caused by exposure in the workplace.

PNG academics threaten strike over wages

Academic staff at the University of Papua New Guinea (UPNG) threatened to strike on March 4 for a wage increase. The National

Academic Staff Association wants the pay rise negotiated last year by the Public Employees Union for its members to be awarded to all public sector workers, including university employees.

The UPNG is refusing to grant the pay increase unless it is approved by the PNG government. The government, however, has already ruled out any possibility of a flow on. The UPNG has its main campus in Waigani, a School of Medicine in Port Moresby, and open colleges throughout the country.



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