

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

3 January 2004

## Officials attack migrant workers' protest

Over 40 South Korean immigration officials attacked a demonstration of 100 members and supporters of the Equity Trade Union-Migrant Branch (ETU-MB) on December 31. The protest, held outside the Mok-dong Immigration Office in Seoul, was called to oppose a justice department statement earlier that day threatening to detain migrant branch officials.

According to one eyewitness, immigration officials attempted to seize migrant union leaders but were fought off by a number of Korean supporters. Two supporters were detained but later released.

The ETU-MB has been campaigning since November against government moves to deport all undocumented migrant workers. About 90 ETU-MB unionists have been staging a sit-in at the central Seoul church compound since November 15 to demand an end to the crackdown and for the legalisation of all migrant labour. The government has announced a stay on all detentions and deportations until January 15, demanding that about 100,000 undocumented workers voluntarily leave the country.

## Factory explosion in China claims 38 lives

An explosion killed 38 workers and badly injured many others at a fireworks factory in Tieling, Liaoning Province in northeast China on December 30. The powerful blast, which occurred at around 10am, completely destroyed the plant and set fire to houses about 100 metres away.

According to official statistics, there were 98 accidents and 209 deaths associated with fireworks production in China during the first nine months of last year. This represents a 21 percent increase in the accident rate and a 41.2 percent rise in fatalities over the previous year.

**Indonesian workers owed millions of dollars in unpaid wages**

About 1,000 employees at Jakarta City water supplier PD PAM Jaya are suing the company and its overseas partners, PT Thames Pam Jaya (TPJ) and PT PAM Lyonnaise Jaya (Palyja), to recover unpaid wages. They are claiming 57.4 billion rupiah (\$US6.75 million) for salary increases the company failed to pay last year and 22 billion rupiah for "non-material losses".

On December 29, lawyers for the workers asked the Central Jakarta court to ignore a plea by company representatives that the case be heard in the Jakarta State Administrative Court, pointing out that the three companies were subject to civil law. The companies had hoped to prolong proceedings by diverting the case to the Administrative Court.

## Singapore government threatens pilots

Singapore Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong threatened to ground flag carrier Singapore Airlines this week if the newly-elected leadership of the Airline Pilots Association called strike action during current negotiations for a new pay structure. Goh Chok Tong made the threat in his New Year's address to the nation. Singapore Airlines is 56 percent state-owned.

Pilot association members sacked their union executive last November for capitulating to government demands for staff cuts and huge concessions on wages. The government is currently amending the Trade Unions Act to allow union executives to endorse new work agreements without the approval of their members.

## Rail union calls off strike to defend jobs

On December 31, rail workers in New South Wales endorsed a union recommendation to call off industrial action during the New Year period. The proposed action was part of a campaign against the state Labor government's plan to merge two rail bodies. According to the Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU),

amalgamation of State Rail with the Rail Infrastructure Corporation will cost 1,500 rail jobs. Rail workers went on strike for four hours on December 24 after negotiations with Transport Minister Michael Costa over the merger broke down.

The union also failed in a bid to get the NSW Industrial Relations Commission (IRC) to stall the merger for six months. The IRC claimed that it did not have the power to intervene. The amalgamation will go ahead as planned in early January.

RTBU NSW secretary Nick Lewocki complained that the government had ignored his concerns about the merger, even though the union had “cooperated with major labour reforms over the past 10 years”. During this period, the union endorsed the closure of all major rail workshops, the privatisation of rail freight services and the destruction of thousands of public transport workers’ jobs.

#### **State Labor government excludes union press**

The national nurses union has strongly condemned the Western Australian state Labor government over its decision to exclude reporters from union publications attending government press conferences.

The dispute erupted when a part-time reporter for the *Western Nurse* was told he could not attend a mid-December press conference held by Labor Premier Geoff Gallop and Health Minister Jim McGinty on elective surgery waiting lists. The government defended its decision this week, declaring that only journalists from “impartial, mainstream news outlets” would be admitted at state government press conferences.

The *Western Nurse*, which is published by the Australian Nursing Federation, has been critical of the state government’s health cuts and has called for the dismissal of Health Minister McGinty.

#### **Solomon Islands government refuses cost of living pay rise**

The Solomon Islands Council of Trade Unions this week threatened to call strike action over the government’s refusal to pay an 8 percent cost of living increase to public servants. The government announced it would award only a 2.5 percent rise. The union council said that while Prime Minister Allan Kemakeza had passed a large budget for 2004, workers have been offered only the “budget’s scraps”. Public servants are angry that the government has approved increases for

MPs ranging from \$US1,500 to \$2,000 a year but refused a decent pay rise to state sector workers.

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