

3,000 march in protest over mass sackings by Telecom

By JACQUELINE LEE

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BOOSTED by international support from several overseas telecommunication workers' unions, Hongkong Telecom Group staff yesterday stepped up pressure for negotiations with management over last week's 1,100 redundancies.

More than 3,000 employees and their families, along with colleagues unaffected by the sackings, braved chilly drizzle to stage a protest rally and march before petitioning the Governor at Government House yesterday.

The letter handed in for Sir David Wilson pleaded for his help in urging management to postpone the sackings and open dialogue with staff unions. Company officials have repeatedly rejected the requests.

The demands were backed by telecommunication workers' unions from Britain, the United States, and Canada.

The foreign unions have written to Sir David, Hongkong Telephone Company managing director Mr Greg Crew, and the chairman of Cable and Wireless, Lord Young, in support of the Telecom staff.

Locally, the sacked Telecom workers were backed by 10 major unions, including



Sacked Hongkong Telecom workers on their protest march in Central yesterday.

the 170,000-strong Hongkong Federation of Trade Unions, the 17,000-member Hongkong Federation of Civil Service Unions, the Hongkong Confederation of Trade Unions, the Professional Teachers' Union, the Union of Hongkong Post Office Employees and the Social Workers General Union.

Telecom workers de-

scribed the massive lay-off as "disheartening and cold-blooded" in the letter to Sir David.

They warned that the redundancies would erode the quality of telecommunication services in Hongkong and could have serious implications for job security for the whole community.

Workers were also frustrated that the public was

misled into thinking that sacked staff had all been compensated with huge sums of money.

Staff joint conference chairman Mr Chan Yiu-shui said: "The bulk of the payments were provident funds, of which the majority had come from the worker's own pocket."

"Staff are entitled to col-

Telecom workers march in protest

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lect the money even if they resign, so it should not be counted as compensation."

The secretary of the Hongkong Telephone Company Chinese Workers Union, Mr So Man-hing, said the mass sackings had hit staff morale.

"It will shake employee loyalty. Staff, for example, will think twice about hanging on to their jobs when they have completed 10 years' service which entitles them to an extra lump sum provident fund payment."

Mr Crew had guaranteed that there would be no further retrenchment, but Mr So said staff were sceptical.

Before the actual sackings, staff had heard that retrenchment would be in areas of overlapping functions such as marketing and

management. But now we can see that those dismissed were mostly staff of lower ranks and nearing retirement age.

Hongkong Telecom chief executive Mr Michael Gale repeated yesterday that the retrenchment exercise had already been carried out and could not be reversed.

"A recent study into the way in which Hongkong Telephone and Hongkong Telecom International operated had shown that we had more staff than we needed. Action therefore had to be taken," he said.

Apart from hotlines set up for employers interested in taking on some of the sacked workers, the staff were being given priority to attend the group's extensive training facilities to help them retrain.