

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

13 September 2003

Miners' strike in Indonesia enters second week

A strike at coal mining company PT Kaltim Prima Coal (KPC) in East Kalimantan has entered its second week. The mine, one of the largest in the country, is jointly owned by Anglo-American energy company BP PLC and Anglo-Australian mining conglomerate Rio Tinto.

The workers went on strike on August 29, after learning that BP and Rio Tinto were planning to sell their stake in the mine by October to PT Bumi Resources for \$US500 million, including retiring \$187 million worth of debt. The 2,700-strong workforce is demanding 15 percent of the sales proceeds as a bonus. The current owners say they will pay a bonus, but dismiss the amount sought by workers as "unreasonable".

The strike is causing production losses of \$500,000 daily and a government spokesman said up to \$3 million in royalties would be lost if it continued for more than a month. Under its contract, KPC pays 13.5 percent of the proceeds from its output to the government.

The decision by BP and Rio Tinto to sell its holdings in the mine to PT Bumi Resources cuts across a central government ruling made last year that a 20 percent stake should be allocated to the state coal mining firm PT Tambang Batubara Bukit Asam, and 31 percent to the local governments.

Indonesian taxi drivers protest new airport regulations

Hundreds of taxi drivers held a five-hour protest at Soekarno-Hatta International Airport on September 6 to oppose a new regulation by airport operator PT Angkasa Pura. The regulation bans taxi drivers picking up and dropping off passengers in the left lane at Terminals I and II.

The drivers are bitter that they were not informed about the change. It means potential passengers have to cross the street in front of the terminals to get a taxi. The protest was called after a driver attempting to pick up a passenger was ordered away from the terminal by security guards.

Hotel workers demand severance pay in Indonesia

Workers laid off by the Bukit Mutiara Hotel in Batam are preparing a campaign, including legal action, to force the owners to pay them one billion rupiah (\$US117,647) in severance pay.

The one-star hotel employing 55 people was closed suddenly on July 31 without the workers being given prior notice. Employees believe the premises will be rented out as a gambling parlor. The chairman of the local branch of the Indonesian Prosperity Labor Union (SBSI) Bambang Yulianto said this week the union would begin legal action against the hotel owners if they failed respond to workers' demand.

Philippine pineapple process workers strike over wages

Office and technical workers at the giant pineapple company Dole Philippines (Dolefil) went on strike last week over a new collective bargaining agreement (CBA). The workers, members of the Associated Labor Union (ALU), are seeking an 8 percent salary rise and a 12,000-peso (\$US224) signing-off bonus. Company management is refusing to increase its offer of 7 percent and 8,000 pesos for signing off.

Management claims that the company's 4,000 employees average daily wage of 870 pesos (\$US16) is above the industry standard. Factory-floor

workers' pay, however, is based on nine categories. The lowest grade worker receives approximately 223 pesos (\$US4.16) daily while the highest gets just 511 pesos (\$US9.55). The average was determined by including supervisors and executive salaries, which range from 25,000 to 300,000 pesos a month.

Dolefil management wants the National Labor Relations Commission to declare the ongoing strike illegal. It claims that employees are violating a "no strike" clause in the CBA signed in February 2001. The company is also threatening to seek damages of 36 million pesos from the workers and their union.

Philippine mining workers protest over outsourcing

Over 200 workers retrenched by Philex Mining Corporation are consulting labour organisations and lawyers for a possible class suit against the company. The giant copper and gold mining company has been operating for 45 years and has a workforce of approximately 4,000. Most of the retrenched employees have been working there for 15 to 30 years.

A spokesperson for the regional labour organisation Kilusang Mayo Uno (KMU) said the retrenchments are a cost-cutting measure to replace full-time staff with contractual workers. She said Philex plans to retrench 10 percent of its workforce from each department, a total of 300 employees.

Filipino university staff to strike for wage increase

A total of 336 staff employed at the University of San Agustin, in the city of Iloilo, voted this week to strike following stalled negotiations for a new Collective Bargaining Agreement. Central to the deadlock is management's refusal to pay staff 70 percent of the latest tuition fee increase as stipulated by a government act.

The union (USAEU-FFW), which represents 650 university employees, has accused management of "blatantly" disregarding the act. Administration claims it cannot pay the increase because the university's financial position has worsened due to a steady decline in enrolments over the past three years.

USAEU-FFW President Theodore Neil Lasola said the union is ready to call the strike but will meet with the university president first.

Road workers in Sri Lanka fight closure

Around 2,600 workers from the Road Creation and Development Corporation (RCDC) held a roadside protest 16 kilometres south of Colombo on August 5, against government plans to close the corporation. The area is near the RCDC main office. Protesters carried banners and placards denouncing the move.

The RCDC, established in 1987 after the government dissolved the Department of Highways, is responsible for the maintenance of thousands of kilometres of highways and hundreds of bridges.

According to a spokesman for the Engineering Services Union, the government has been awarding contracts to private companies, despite the higher cost involved. He said that about 6,000 of the once 8,500-strong casual workforce had been laid off. Around 60,000 people depend on the corporation for their livelihood.

Water board workers in Sri Lanka fight for pay increase

Workers at the National Water Supplies and Drainage Board (NWSDB) in Sri Lanka picketed the company's head office in the Ratmalana industrial area, 15 kilometres south of Colombo, on September 3. They are demanding a salary increase.

According to NWSDB Joint Council of Trade Unions convenor, a salary increase has been due since 2000. He warned of further action if the management does not respond to the workers' demands.

Pakistani food workers protest over unpaid salaries

Food Department workers in Pakistan's Sindh province began a hunger strike on September 3 outside the Press Club in Sukkur, the province's main city. They are demanding the payment of three months salary owing to them. The government's refusal to pay the arrears is causing severe hardship to workers and their families. Workers warned that protests would continue until their demand is met.

Disability workers strike over job security

Around 100 temporary workers employed to provide services for the disabled in northern New South Wales went on strike on September 9 in an effort to secure long-term job security contracts from the state's Department of Health and Human Services.

The workers, who are members of the Health and Community Services Union, said Human Services had offered a written commitment to temporary workers in state's south but not to those in northern NSW. A union spokesperson claimed the department was attempting to implement staffing and roster changes in the north by the end of the month without consultation.

NRMA workers strike over superannuation

About 420 roadside mechanics and car inspectors from the National Roads and Motorists Association (NRMA) roadside service in New South Wales struck for 24 hours from midnight September 9. The dispute is over management's failure to fully inform employees about adverse changes to their superannuation scheme. A spokesman for Australian Manufacturing Workers Union said that workers would meet to decide on further action.

Managerial staff strike at enamel factory

Thirty-five managers, supervisors, technicians and administrative staff at the glaze and powder coating manufacturer Ferro Corporation in Melbourne went on strike last week in protest against a new workplace agreement. Other staff at the factory walked off the job at lunchtime on September 8 in solidarity.

Managers and Professionals Association executive officer David Sweet said that managerial staff had been threatened with dismissal unless they signed new contracts by October 1. Under the new agreements, redundancy entitlements would be cut by up to 80 percent and annual leave loading abolished. "This 'sign here or be sacked' approach to workplace relations is just as unacceptable to white-collar workers as it is to blue collars," Sweets said.

Miners strike in defence of jobs and safety

Miners from AngloCoal's German Creek colliery in Queensland returned to work this week after a two-week strike. Last weekend they protested in the nearby town of Middlemount.

The workers want present staffing levels guaranteed in the next enterprise work agreement. In an attempt to cut permanent jobs, the company has been offering voluntary redundancy payouts and refusing to replace older employees who resign or retire. AngloCoal has been employing miners on a casual "as-needs basis" to maintain its production levels.

Teachers call for industrial action in South Australia

A special two-hour meeting of South Australian public school teachers' union delegates on September 8 supported a series of statewide rolling stoppages over the forced transfer of five teachers from Craigmore High School in Adelaide, South Australia.

The 100 delegates from across the state also condemned the actions of

Department of Education chief executive Steve Marshall. The department used the results of a review that found poor student performances at the school as a pretext to transfer five teachers—Nick Cava, Annette Chigros, Dale Pope, Mike Jones and Duncan Kennington—on August 15. All five were active union members.

Despite the overwhelming vote for industrial action, Australian Education Union President Chris Waugh said this "would not be something the union would implement immediately" and the next step was for the union to distribute information on the Craigmore situation to all its members. Another union spokesman said a ballot on the proposed stoppages "was not something that would happen in the next week".

Power workers fight utility carve-up in Western Australia

Western Power maintenance workers in Collie struck for 24 hours last weekend after talks with the Western Australian (WA) state government over plans to carve up the utility stalled. The Labor government wants to divide the state-owned enterprise into four companies. The union believes this will result in job losses.

Head of Western Power will receive a \$100,000 bonus if the break-up is successful. At the same time the company has cut annual bonus payments to workers from \$1,365 in 2002 to \$850 this year.

The Communications, Electrical, Plumbers Union and the Australian Services Union have threatened to cut power to State Parliament and some major companies.

Teachers angry over pay offer

Teachers, clerks, secretaries, library and boarding staff from Catholic schools in Western Australia have threatened industrial action next week after rejecting the latest pay offer from the Catholic Education Office. They will work contracted hours but have refused to do extra-curricular duties. The teachers are demanding a 30 percent wage increase over three years and reduced class sizes as part of a new enterprise agreement.

WA public school teachers are also planning industrial action after rejecting a three percent pay increase offer by the government. A spokesman for the Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers Union said that teachers are some of the lowest paid in the community and the three percent offer would increase the pay of many teachers by only \$15 or \$16 a week.

New Zealand allied health workers to strike

The New Zealand Nurses Organisation (NZNO) and Public Service Association (PSA) have served strike notices on the Southland District Health Board for industrial action between September 22 and October 14. The action involves rolling stoppages, a two-day strike, work-to-rule, overtime callback, and on-call duty roster bans. The notices also include an anti-suspension measure—if any union member is suspended as a consequence of work bans, all union members will walk off the job until the suspensions are lifted.

The unions are campaigning for a new work agreement. The Professional, Technical and Related Collective Employment Agreement covers allied health professionals such as occupational therapists, physiotherapists, psychologists, nurses, and pharmacists. Hoping to avoid industrial action, the two unions have instigated a further attempt at mediation to be held on September 17. Previous efforts at mediation have failed.

New Zealand nurses' dispute settled

A stalemate between the NZ Nurses Organisation and the Waikato District Health Board (WDHB) over pay rises negotiated 10 weeks ago has been settled. Nurses employed by the Waikato, Northland, Bay of Plenty, Lakes and Tairāwhiti district health boards will now receive a 10 to 12 percent pay rise, phased in over three years.

Northland, Bay of Plenty, Lakes and Tairāwhiti boards previously signed an interim agreement to pay nurses according to the new contract. The WDHB refused to pay the new rates until the entire Multi-Party Collective Agreement was signed off. Talks ended last week when the

board signed an interim agreement allowing for Waikato's nurses to be given the salary rise, including back pay.

Sacked Fiji cannery workers told to reapply for their jobs

Nearly 350 striking workers employed at the state-owned Pacific Fishing Company in Levuka, who were sacked on August 15 just 24 hours after going on strike, were told this week that they could reapply for their jobs.

The strike by mainly female workers was over the company's refusal to honor an arbitration award handed down earlier this year. The issue remains unresolved. Since the strike began, the company has maintained operations by hiring scab labour from around the island.

Although the majority of the strikers signed up to the Fiji Sugar and General Workers Union early in the dispute, the union refused to take up their case, claiming they had joined to late.



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