

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

24 September 2011

## West Papua mine workers on strike

Over 9,000 workers at Freeport McMoRan's Grasberg gold and copper mine in the Indonesian province of West Irian Jaya (West Papua) walked off the job on September 15 to begin a one-month strike for a wage rise.

The Freeport Indonesia's Labor Union ended a nine-day strike in July after the company agreed to offer a pay increase and meet with the union over allegations of mistreatment by some managers. The mine workers want a rise of between \$US17.50 and \$43 an hour, up from the current \$1.50 to \$3.50 hour rate, to bring them into line with Freeport mine workers in other countries. The company, according to the union, has only offered an 11 percent rise.

A spokesman for the strikers said conditions at the high-altitude mine were extreme: "It's so hard to breathe because the oxygen is not normal, the temperature is very cold and then our work area is very, very dangerous." About 700 paramilitary police have been mobilised to support the company, which has threatened to use outsourced workers to break the strike.

Operating since the 1960s, the Freeport mine has some of the world's richest gold reserves. The US company's Indonesian subsidiary is the highest single taxpayer to the Indonesian government.

## India: Mumbai civic workers strike

On September 20, 80,000 Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) workers defied a court order and walked off the job for 24 hours affecting road cleaning, garbage collection, water supply and health services. The Municipal Mazdoor Union (MZU), which covers 70 percent of BMC employees, called the strike to oppose cuts in leave days from 15 to 8 per year, and a 45-minute increase in the work day. The changed conditions are part of the Sixth Pay Commission recommendations that have been accepted by other BMC unions.

Strikers have been docked a day's pay and BMC has issued a de-recognition notice to the MZU and sacked seven employees for allegedly obstructing non-striking workers. BMC has told the media that striking workers and their union will have to pay compensation for the walk-out. The BMC, which governs Mumbai city, is India's richest municipal organisation with a massive annual budget.

## Philippines university and college staff and students strike

Thousands of students, academics and administrators at 110 state

universities and colleges (SUCs) across the Philippines began a week of protests and strikes on September 19 against the Aquino government's cuts to education.

Demonstrating students were addressed by academics and administrators. In Metro Manila protesters called for funds to be "rechannelled from the military, corruption and dole-outs, to schools and hospitals."

According to education administrators, the 2012 National Expenditure Program allocated 21.8 billion pesos (\$US512 million) for the SUCs, far below the 45 billion pesos requested and lower than the 2011 budget of 22.03 billion. No funds were provided for building and land maintenance, new structures or office equipment.

## Cambodian hotel workers demonstrate

Over 70 employees of the Angkor Village Hotel and Resort in Siem Reap, in northwestern Cambodia, protested at the hotel on September 16 to demand management follow an August 30 arbitration council directive to reinstate 67 workers fired in July.

The workers were sacked on trumped-up offences including allegations that they tried to poison management, after staff began unionising early this year. Management refused to meet the protesters and issued a note stating that the dismissed workers would not be reinstated.

## Cambodian garment workers end strike

Nearly 400 employees of Zhen Yun factory in Phnom Penh's Russei Keo district returned to work on September 19 after management met some of their demands. The workers walked out three days earlier over 12 demands, including payment of annual bonuses and adequate overtime payments. Zhen Yun management told a meeting with Free Trade Union representatives and the Cambodian Ministry of Labour that the company would pay annual bonuses on October 10. Management also agreed to begin paying legal overtime rates and that factory supervisors using inappropriate language against workers would be disciplined. A union representative said workers would resume their strike if the company did not implement the agreement.

## Strikes continue at Toyota

Over 3,000 Toyota Australia workers walked off the job on Thursday for 48 hours stopping production at the company's car assembly plant in Altona and closing its parts distribution centres in Melbourne and Sydney.

The strike was called after pay talks between the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) and Toyota reached deadlock on Tuesday evening. The union wants a 12 percent pay rise over 36 months, with four percent each year. The company has offered 11 percent over 39 months.

A Toyota executive told the media that the company would bypass the union and organise a secret ballot of workers on its latest offer. The auto workers have not had a pay increase since April last year. The current enterprise agreement expired in July.

Toyota Australia claims the strikes are costing it \$10 million a day in lost sales. The company produces 119,000 cars a year and exports 70 percent of them, making it the biggest car exporter in Australia.

### **Australian Capital Territory teachers to strike**

Over 2,000 Australian Education Union (AEU) members plan to hold a three-hour stoppage and rally in Canberra next Tuesday after negotiations deadlocked with the education department for a new work place agreement. Teachers want wage parity with their New South Wales colleagues. The territory Labor government has capped public sector wage increases at 2.5 percent.

The AEU suspended four days of rolling stoppages last week claiming sufficient progress was being made in negotiations. The AEU this week rejected the education department's latest offer, claiming casual relief teachers would be paid \$21 a day less than those interstate and all teachers would be worse off by the end of the three-year agreement. The consumer price index (CPI) annual increase for Canberra is 3.6 percent.

### **Queensland meat processing workers on strike**

At least 22 maintenance workers at the JBS Australia meat-processing plant in Townsville, far north Queensland, walked off the job last Saturday to demand a pay rise. The Australian Manufacturing Workers Union and the Electrical Trades Union said their members have not had a pay rise for two years.

The unions claim they have been negotiating for a 3.8 percent pay rise for over 18 months. The maintenance workers are picketing the plant and have said that they will remain on strike until their demand is met.

### **Victorian airport cleaners maintain rolling stoppages**

Cleaners employed by Spotless at the Tullamarine and Avalon airports in Melbourne are maintaining rolling stoppages. United Voice (UV) members want Spotless to reinstate a \$1,600 annual allowance paid by other airport contractors. The allowance is for parking fees and car maintenance costs to compensate for the lack of public transport to the airports.

Spotless cleaners at Avalon began rolling stoppages on September 16 while cleaners at Tullamarine continued similar action begun a week earlier, including a 24-hour strike on September 12. Spotless has been able

to circumvent the union's limited industrial action by hiring additional temporary workers.

### **Victorian government workers to vote on industrial action**

Over 12,000 Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) members in Victoria will vote on industrial action following the collapse of pay negotiations with the state Liberal government. The CPSU covers a third of the state's public servants.

The union has demanded a 6 percent annual pay rise for public servants, a 35-hour basic working week, six weeks' annual leave and a 1.75 percentage increase to superannuation contributions. The Baillieu government has offered a 2.5 percent annual pay rise cap, with any additional amounts to be offset by "bankable" savings.

The CPSU has listed 63 separate actions, which it claims will "frustrate" the state government's ability to function. All action, however, is limited to bans, such as collecting fines and processing data, and does not include strike action. The ballot closes on October 28 with industrial action planned for November.

### **New Zealand: Fisher & Paykel workers reject union negotiated pay deal**

On September 21, over 900 production, maintenance and distribution workers at the Fisher & Paykel Healthcare plant in Highbrook, south Auckland overwhelmingly rejected the latest pay deal negotiated by their two unions.

The Engineering, Printing, and Manufacturing Union and the National Distribution Union responded by cancelling planned industrial action, telling workers they had to consider an "improved" union-management offer. Apart from the addition of a one-off, sign-on \$300 payment (\$US245), the deal failed to increase the company's previous offer of a 3 percent pay rise, followed by an additional 3.2 percent the next year. This is far below the 5.7 percent demanded by workers when they voted for strike action two weeks ago.

The two unions have been negotiating with Healthcare since May and will resume talks with the company on Monday. The plant is covered under the essential services provision of the Employment Relations Act because it makes systems for respiratory care. This requires employees give 14 days' notice and the exact details of any planned industrial action.



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