

Indonesian police open fire on striking miners in Papua

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Indonesian para-military police mobilised by President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's government opened fire on striking workers near the giant Freeport-McMoran gold and copper mine in Papua on Monday, killing at least one striker and wounding more than a dozen others.

Petrus Ayamiseba was shot dead in the police attack, which marks an escalation of the efforts of the US-based company, backed by the Yudhoyono administration, to break the indefinite strike by the 12,000 workers—the longest in the mine's 40-year history.

Hundreds of paramilitary police were sent to the region as soon as the stoppage began on September 15, a clear demonstration of the government's readiness to help Freeport crush the fight for better pay and conditions. Employed in the largest and most profitable gold and copper mine in the world—with the remaining reserves currently valued at about \$US50 billion—the strikers have demanded that their hourly wages, currently as low as \$2, rise to a minimum of \$17.50.

In addition to Petrus, who was shot in the chest, another worker was hospitalised in a critical condition and several other workers were seriously injured. At least two were shot with rubber bullets, two were struck by rifle butts and one suffered burns from a tear gas canister.

A trade union representative told the *Jakarta Post* that police fired on workers to stop them entering Gorong-Gorong bus terminal in coastal Timika, where Freeport provides buses to transport workers to the mountainous Tembagapura (Grasberg) mine site in the Indonesian province. Strikers had learnt that the company was moving strike-breakers into their barracks, which still contain their possessions.

"The workers were walking and about to enter the terminal when suddenly we heard gunshots," Freeport Labor Union (SPSI) spokesman Juli Parorrangan said.

After Petrus was killed, mine workers burned four trailers, according to local television footage seen by

Reuters. Local police chief Denny Siregar said he had called for reinforcements, and assigned 500-600 police to deal with the strikers.

Police and company officials cynically blamed the strikers for the casualties. Papua police spokesman Lieutenant Colonel Wachyono accused the strikers of "complete anarchy" and "attacking the police". Police even alleged that one paramilitary officer had been killed, a claim that was later dropped.

Freeport, based in Phoenix, Arizona, released a statement demanding the arrest of strikers, claiming that they had blocked roads and intimidated replacement workers at bus terminals and barracks in recent weeks. "We are continuing to work with local police to deal with these acts of intimidation," it said.

Yudhoyono's government has been closely monitoring the strike, which has substantially affected the output at the giant mine—its largest single source of tax revenue. Energy and Mineral Resources Minister Darwin Zahedy Saleh said he had personally informed the president of the fatal incident.

The strike is the second at the mine this year, involving about half the project's 23,000 workers. Miners walked off the job for eight days in July, but the SPSI union ended the strike after the company agreed to begin talks on pay rates and hear allegations of mistreatment by managers. Union officials have now sought to end the latest confrontation by lowering their minimum wage claim to \$12.50 an hour. Freeport has refused to budge from its offer of just \$3 an hour.

Union representatives have portrayed the industrial action as a bid for equity for the mostly indigenous Papuan workers, saying they receive the lowest wages of any Freeport workers in the world. But Freeport miners in Peru are also on indefinite strike over low wages at the company's Cerro Verde mine, which produces 2 percent of the world's copper. They downed tools on September

29, demanding a new contract to increase their pay by 11 percent.

These twin strikes illustrate the global character of the class struggle and the need to unify the fight of Freeport and other miners internationally against the mining conglomerates. Freeport-McMoRan Copper & Gold is a major world company, with North American operations in Morenci and Safford, South American mines at Cerro Verde and El Abra, and a mining project at Tenke Fungurume in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Because of Papua's vast natural resources, including oil and gas, the Indonesian government has tens of thousands of troops deployed in the region, which was incorporated into Indonesia in 1963. The military presence includes an air force base, a naval base and Kopassus special forces troops, which committed some of the former Suharto regime's worst crimes, including arbitrary arrests and the killing of political opponents.

Freeport, which was granted its mining licence by the former Suharto dictatorship in 1967, has long enjoyed the protection of the Indonesian military, which has received millions of dollars per year to provide security against the workforce, local people and separatist guerrillas. Over many years, villagers have been forcibly removed to make way for mining, waste dumping and the construction of townships, roads, airfields and military posts.

The Yudhoyono administration's interests in maintaining the cheap labour regime at the mine are obvious. The government is actually a shareholder of PT Freeport, owning 9.36 percent, with the US parent company retaining 90.64 percent. Between 1992 and June 2011, the company paid \$12.8 billion to the government, even though it pays only 1.5 percent royalties, one of the lowest rates in the world, and far below even the levels set by a 2003 Indonesian law—3.75 percent for gold and 4 percent for copper.

Yudhoyono, a former Suharto regime general, has won support in Western capitals and boardrooms for running a pro-business, free-market policy since taking office in 2004, yet is under renewed pressure because of the global economic breakdown. The World Bank last week warned that Indonesia, like other countries whose export revenues depend heavily on commodities, were "not immune" from the fallout of the sovereign debt crisis in Europe.

On the same day, amid signs of downturn in the EU, US and China, the government lowered its growth forecast for

2011 to 6.1 percent, down from 6.5 percent. This is below the level needed to prevent the official unemployment rate rising above the most recent estimate of 7.14 percent of the country's 116 million workers.

Financial market credit ratings agency Fitch Ratings last month said Indonesia's prospects of securing investment grade sovereign rating, which would boost its ability to lure global capital, depended on improving poor infrastructure and keeping inflation under control, a euphemism for enforcing low wages.

Addressing the Council on Foreign Relations in New York on September 27, Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa said the government was determined to deal with "law and order problems" in Papua. "Now any government must ensure stability and law and order and cannot simply let these kinds of situations develop out of control," he said.

Freeport also carries considerable clout in Washington. CEO Adkerson is a listed speaker at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) CEO summit, to be held in Honolulu on November 10-12. According to its web site, the mission of the 2011 USA Host Committee is "to advance the US business agenda in the Asia Pacific region by creating high quality opportunities for private sector engagement during the US hosting of APEC 2011."

Since 2009, President Barack Obama, who is due to visit Indonesia in November, has bolstered relations with Jakarta as part of Washington's escalating efforts to combat Chinese influence in Asia. Last year, his administration lifted a decade-long ban on US military collaboration with the notorious Kopassus special forces.



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