

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

17 December 2011

Freeport union negotiates sell-out pay deal at West Papua mine

A few days after 8,000 miners voted to extend strike action at Freeport-McMoRan's gold and copper mine in the Indonesian province of West Papua, the All-Indonesian Workers Union (SPSI) finalised a pay agreement that delivered an increase that is one-twelfth of the amount workers had originally demanded. The miners, who were paid as little as \$US1.50 an hour, were due to end the strike and resume duties today. They had been on strike since September 15.

The miners wanted their wages increased to at least \$17.50 an hour and conditions and entitlements improved. Following a breakdown in negotiations in October, the SPSI reduced the minimum claim to \$7.80 an hour.

Although the SPSI and the PT Freeport Indonesia Workers' Union admitted the pay deal "falls short of workers' demands" they claimed victory, pointing to slightly improved conditions and the dropping of disciplinary charges against several miners. The miners will be paid for the time they were on strike and receive a 24 percent pay rise calculated from October 1, 2011 and a 13 percent increase in October 2012.

Management also agreed that all allowances—health care, housing, education, shift premiums, service-year bonuses, and a metal bonus—would be calculated on fixed costs rather than Freeport-McMoRan's variable costs scheme.

Pakistan power workers strike over privatisation

Thousands of Water and Power Development Authority (WAPDA) employees walked off the job and marched in 17 major cities on December 8 to oppose government plans to privatise power distribution and Pakistan Electric Power Company's nine national thermal power stations. The step involves transfer of Pakistan Electric Power Company duties to a new Central Power Purchasing Agency, acting under the ministry of water and power.

The recent strike follows a 24-hour walkout in November by hundreds of power distribution utility workers in Islamabad, Faisalabad, Lahore and Gujranwala. Over 120 sub-divisional offices were shut by the strike. National walkouts and protests against the planned privatisation began in January.

Former KESC employees protest

Several hundred Karachi Electric Supply Company (KESC) employees

rallied outside the Karachi Press Club on December 12 denouncing power company management for allegedly terminating 250 employees and forcing them into the voluntary separation scheme. After KESC was privatised last year it transferred 4,000 regular "non-core" workers onto contracts.

Under pressure from Karachi's business community, which was suffering from power outages due to KESC's inadequate staffing levels, the government intervened and ordered reinstatement of the regular non-core workers. KESC responded by putting them in a surplus pool and offering them voluntary separation. According to a union deal made in July, workers who rejected voluntary separation were supposed to have been reabsorbed into KESC's workforce.

Bangladeshi garment workers protest

Hundreds of demonstrating Chittagong Export Processing Zone (CEPZ) garment workers spilled out onto the road outside the facility for several hours on December 9. The garment workers were protesting over high rents and poor living conditions. Several vehicles and shop fronts were damaged after police attempted to clear the street. The five-hour protest ended when police gave a commitment to arrange talks between the CEPZ authority, homeowners and workers.

Protesters called for uninterrupted supplies of gas, water and electricity and an end to the frequent rent increases. A Pacific Jeans worker said she shared a room with two others and had to live with constant utility interruptions. A Bangladesh Spinners and Knitters employee said that his house rent had increased by nearly 70 percent over the last year. Monthly pay for a typical CEPZ garment worker is 4,000 taka (\$US54).

India: Pre-University college teachers in Karnataka end strike

Over 1,000 striking teachers at Pre-University (PU) colleges in Karnataka ended a week-long strike on Thursday without resolution. A Karnataka State Pre-University College Lecturers' Association official told the media that the strike was being dragged out by the government. The teachers walked out on December 8 to demand a salary rise.

The government has said it will not review wages before the 5th Pay Commission report is submitted to the government.

The teachers' association claims that the government has had the report for six months but is withholding it because it recommends that PU teachers' basic monthly salaries be lifted from 11,400 rupees to 14,050 rupees (\$US266). Teachers plan to boycott exam marking in April if the issue is not resolved.

Maharashtra daily-wage workers strike

Over 100 daily-wage employees at the Maharajbagh Zoo, garden and nursery complex in Nagpur, Maharashtra walked off the job on Monday to demand a wage rise and regularisation. The PDKV Workers' Sanghatana, representing over 400 workers at the complex, wants day rates increased from 120 to 220 rupees (\$US4.10).

While their employment is irregular, many day workers had been at the complex for over 25 years. The College of Agriculture & Zoo management is keeping the zoo open with scab labour.

Karnataka daily-wage workers protest

Several dozen daily-wage workers in Bangalore, Karnataka rallied at the Banappa Park on December 12 and began a hunger strike over low wages, non-payment of wages and irregular work. Those involved in the protest included workers from the forest department, Vidhana Soudha press, municipalities and social welfare and irrigation departments who are paid as little as 2.64 rupees or five US cents a day.

Demonstrators said they would maintain the hunger strike until the government regularised the employment of all 15,000 daily wage workers and paid dues. Some workers have not been paid for over six months.

The government agreed to establish a committee to investigate workers' claims following a similar protest in 2009. Committee recommendations calling on the government to regularise all daily wage workers, however, were ignored.

Cambodian garment workers protest

Over 200 Shinglecom Cambodia garment workers protested outside the factory in Phnom Penh's Dangkor district on December 8 to demand reinstatement of a representative from their newly formed union. Factory management claims that Sin Vanhong, a member of the Union Federation for Labour Rights, was fired because he was injured on the job and could not work. Protesters have rejected this, stating that he was sacked because he played a leading role in establishing the union last month.

The protesting garment workers have also demanded improved pay, working conditions and benefits and dismissal of a manager for using obscene language. Shinglecom Cambodia management told labour dispute officials that they would not rehire Sin Vanhong and only negotiate on the other issues as per Cambodian labour law.

Taiwan domestic workers protest

About 2,000 people, including migrant workers, college students and other workers, marched in Taipei, the Taiwan capital, on December 11 to demand that the government legislate so migrant domestic workers have regular days off and a minimum wage. It was the third protest since 2007 over the issue.

The protest was organised by the Taiwan International Workers' Association, with demonstrators carrying banners saying "Where are my days off" and "I still don't have any days off".

A demonstrating welfare worker said that only 5.4 percent of the 200,000 foreign domestic workers in Taiwan have leave on public holidays and weekends, and at least 42 percent have not had a single day off this year. Migrant domestics, who on average work 13 hours a day, are paid below the official minimum wage and employers hold their passports to prevent them finding better paying jobs.

New South Wales public school teachers stop work

Over 17,000 members of the New South Wales Teachers Federation (NSWTF) stopped work for two hours on December 16 to attend meetings across the state to discuss an Industrial Relations Commission determination that they accept 2.5 percent annual pay increases in a new three-year enterprise agreement. The below-inflation offer would see teachers lose \$17 a week next year and \$35 per week in 2013.

Teachers reluctantly accepted a NSWTF proposal to delay any decision on industrial action for another month while the union attempts to restart negotiations with the government. In November, the teachers' union failed to act on an almost unanimous vote by teachers for a 24-hour strike if an improved offer was not made.

Spotless cleaners in Victoria begin strike action

Hundreds of cleaners at Chadstone, Australia's largest shopping centre, stopped work and demonstrated on December 14 in what the United Voice (UV) union said was the beginning of a series of strikes for reduced workloads and improved wages. Their action follows a similar walkout at Corio Village in Geelong on December 9. The union has threatened strike action at nine other shopping centres before the end of the month.

Last month cleaners working for Spotless at 11 shopping centres across Victoria voted to take protected strike action. According to the United Voice (UV) union, Spotless continually increases the workload by cutting the time allocated for each cleaning job and only pays the minimum hourly wage of \$15.51. UV has demanded a 33 percent pay increase for all cleaners.

The industrial action is part of UV's long-running Clean Start campaign to unionise Australia's low-paid cleaning sector and has involved strikes and protests on the Sunshine Coast in Queensland and in Sydney, New South Wales.

Schweppes workers locked out in Melbourne

Around 150 warehouse workers at Schweppes Australia in Melbourne have been locked out since Thursday following eight weeks of stop-work meetings and a one-day strike over roster changes in a new work agreement.

United Voice members oppose Schweppes' proposal for 24-hour production and extension of the five-day working week to include Saturday. Negotiations have been ongoing since June.

Eleven years ago management mobilised police to forcibly remove

workers involved in a sit-in strike.

New Zealand aged-care workers strike

Hundreds of nurses, caregivers and service workers from 20 facilities of aged-care provider Radius Residential walked off the job for two hours on Monday to attend stop-work meetings over a pay dispute. A Service and Food Workers' Union (SFWU) organiser said Radius had not passed on additional government funding intended for wages over the past two years. The union claimed Radius workers are the lowest paid in the industry at just \$13 and \$14 an hour. The official minimum wage is \$13 an hour.

Radius had offered workers a 1.72 percent pay increase for this year, well below New Zealand's inflation rate of 4.6 percent. The SFWU and New Zealand Nurses Organisation represent 70 percent of Radius' 1,000-strong work force.



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