

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

27 May 2017

Indonesia: Freeport continues sacking of striking mine workers

PT Freeport Indonesia has terminated over 2,000 workers taking strike action at the massive Grasberg copper and gold mine in the Indonesian province of West Papua. The sackings came just days after the Chemical, Energy and Mining Workers Union (SP-KEP) announced that their strike had been extended for another month.

More than 8,000 permanent and contract workers at the mine struck on May 1 over mass lay-offs. Freeport claims that the industrial action is illegal, that strikers are absent without leave, and all those who had struck for five days would lose their jobs. The company has issued 2,018 “voluntary resignation” notices with a final payment of just one month’s salary. Some workers received negative amounts because they had outstanding debts to the company. They were told they would not be reemployed.

The company, which had previously laid off (furloughed) thousands of employees, claims it could axe another 5,000 positions due to production cuts caused by its ongoing contract dispute with the Indonesian government. Under new government rules the company has to obtain a new mining permit, divest a 51 percent stake, build a second copper smelter, relinquish arbitration rights and pay new taxes and royalties. Freeport claims that production at Grasberg could be reduced by 60 percent.

Freeport had introduced a furlough policy, putting 10 percent of its permanent workers on long-term leave at short notice. Although the furlough is paid, workers lose many benefits, including overtime and accommodation. Workers were evicted from company barracks on two days’ notice.

PT Freeport Indonesia, the local subsidiary of Phoenix, USA-based Freeport-McMoRan, employs 12,000 permanent workers, and 20,000 contractors. The union accused the company of implementing the terminations as part of its negotiating strategy with the government.

Filipino jeepney drivers and owners strike again

Jeepney drivers and owners of transport groups PISTON, Stop and Go Coalition, and No to Jeepney Phase-out Coalition held a two-day national strike on Monday over the Philippine government’s plan to phase out passenger jeepneys 15 or more years-old. The strike followed two one-day national stoppages in February over the issue.

The Duterte government claims it wants to modernise transport vehicles and make them environmentally friendly. The union groups allege that only big companies can afford the vehicle replacements demanded and have suggested an upgrade of their jeepneys and improved enforcement of road-worthiness rules. The unions met in February with the Land

Transportation Franchising and Regulatory Board but failed to reach agreement.

Under the draft plan, a jeepney operator was required to have 7 million pesos (\$US140,393) to get a franchise. The operator must have 20 units by 2018 and increase the fleet to 40 units in 2019. Operators were to install GPS and wi-fi into the jeepneys.

The jeepney phase-out, due to begin in July, will affect more than 600,000 drivers and 250,000 operators.

Burmese garment workers strike

Over 350 workers from the Join-Profit garment factory in the Hlaing Tharyar industrial zone struck on May 17 demanding that factory officials follow labour laws and not violate previous agreements. A spokesperson alleged that they were never given leave as stipulated by the labour law and supervisors violated previous labour contracts which had been agreed upon in front of Labour Department officials.

Other complaints were that workers were paid less than the minimum wage, forced to work overtime and their wages cut if they took time off. Workers were still protesting outside the factory the following day.

University teachers in Nepal on strike

Hundreds of part-time teachers from 60 constituent campuses of the Tribhuvan University (TU) walked out for an indefinite period on May 18. The teachers were protesting against the government and university for failing to implement an agreement signed with them eight years ago when they were on a hunger strike. The teachers are holding a daily protest outside the minister’s residence in Baluwater.

The government offered to address teachers’ demands after a clash between police and the demonstrating teachers on the first day of the strike. Teachers rejected the offer, declaring that they wanted their original agreement implemented.

The agreement reached in 2010 included the formation of a working panel to establish a quota for the number of part-time teachers, preparation of criteria for contracts, appointment of contract teachers by fulfilling set standards and an increase in contract teachers’ salaries.

According to the Nepal Part Time Teachers’ Association, over 1,200 part-time teachers are affected. The part-timers are forced to teach up to 24 periods in a week while permanent teachers teach only 10 periods per week. A spokesman said they are only paid 360 rupees per period in contrast to permanent teachers who received 2,000 rupees per period as well as other allowances.

India: West Bengal textile workers on strike

Workers from the Jaya Shree Textiles factory in Hooghly, West Bengal have been on strike since May 16 to demand a wage rise and other improvements. All production at the factory has ceased. Police dispersed a picket outside the plant late last week. Workers accused the police of siding with the management and threatening them with firearms.

Management claimed the strike was illegal because the work agreement signed in 2015 does not expire until July 2018.

Punjab sanitation workers walkout

Hundreds of sanitation workers of the Bathinda Municipal Corporation began an indefinite strike on May 22 in a dispute about the selection of over 320 new recruits. The Sanitation Workers' Union is opposed to the corporation's selection committee which intends to select new recruits on "merit." Workers feared that the selections would be made on a political basis and have demanded greater involvement in the process and that it be transparent.

Kerala port workers protest against privatisation

Members of the Water Transport Workers Federation of India, affiliated to the Stalinist Centre for Indian Trade Unions, went on a two-day protest at Willingdon Island, Kochi on May 23 to oppose the government's new port authority bill. They are concerned that the Major Port Authorities Bill, 2016 is the first step to privatisation of major ports.

The union's major concern is that it will lose one of their two positions on the port authority board.

West Bengal paper mill workers protest

Around 100 workers from the state-run Hindustan Paper Corporation Mill in Kolkata, West Bengal demonstrated in the company's headquarters on May 18 to demand payment of wages. The workers, including 60 permanent staff and 40 others, including apprentice, casual and contract employees, have been demonstrating against non-payment of salaries for the past six months.

The Hindustan Paper Employees' Association and Hindustan Corporation Officers and Supervisors' Association said almost 1,600 employees of the company's two mills in Assam have also had wages stopped due to the temporary closure of the mills. Workers suspect the government intends to privatise the mills.

Pakistan: Islamabad police attack protesting government clerks

Over 500 government clerks demonstrating at several locations in Islamabad to demand a wage rise were arrested by police on May 18. The protests outside the National Press Club and Parliament House were first attacked with tear gas and then batons. The clerks were eventually released without being charged.

The All Pakistan Clerks Association claims that the government has ignored the clerks' call for a significant pay increase for several years. The police action was an attempt to bully the workers into silence.

Punjab public sector workers strike

Punjab government workers from five cities in the province struck work on Monday in a long-running dispute for a pay rise and a 20 percent allowance. The strike, by members of the Punjab Treasuries and Accounts Services Association (PTAA) in Bahawalpur, Sahiwal, Rahim Yar Khan, Toba Tek Singh and Bahawalnagar, followed a week of daily one-hour stoppages over the issue. A protest camp has been set up in each city.

According to the PTAA, the province's chief minister had issued a directive in March accepting workers' demands but the finance secretary is delaying taking action. A PTAA spokesman said that salaries of other government employees in the province were upgraded in 2010 with provision of a 20 percent allowance.

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa government health workers strike

Health workers at several government hospitals in Peshawar stopped work on May 18 to demand the withdrawal of pending criminal investigations against some workers and the reversal of disciplinary transfers. Workers from the Lady Reading Hospital, Khyber Teaching Hospital and Hayatabad Medical Complex attended a demonstration at Jinnah Park called by the All Employees Coordination Council.

Health workers want police investigations or First Information Reports (FIRs) issued against several workers involved in previous protests withdrawn. FIRs are frequently used to intimidate workers from participating in further industrial action.

Victoria: Fletcher Insulation workers end 96-day strike

Over 90 workers at Fletcher Insulation in Dandenong, Victoria returned to work on Wednesday after being on strike for 96 days over the company's proposed enterprise agreement. Workers accepted the latest proposal after Fletcher, following negotiations with the Australian Workers Union, withdrew an original proposal that extended working hours, cut conditions, removed minimum manning levels, and imposed a four-year wage freeze. The company also wanted unlimited use of casual workers and to slash existing redundancy provisions.

The new agreement includes a 2 percent pay rise and retaining uncapped redundancy payments and permanent employment for casuals and labour hire workers after three months. While the AWU claimed that existing conditions were maintained, it has not made public details on working hours. A union statement claimed that management's proposed unrestricted use of casuals was "restricted" and management's proposed 38-hour week was "reduced".

Locked out plywood mill workers vote on new wage offer

Management at the Carter Holt Harvey (CHH) plywood mill at Myrtleford in Victoria's northeast has told its 207 locked out workers that a vote will be held on a revised proposed enterprise agreement on June 6. A union spokesman said it differed little from the one rejected by workers earlier in the year.

The workers, members of the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU), Electrical Trades Union of Australia and Australian Manufacturing Workers' Union, were locked out on April 19 after announcing they planned to begin rolling stoppages and overtime bans following 12 months of failed negotiations.

While workers are currently picketing the mill, the unions have isolated the lockout. Union members at CHH's plants in Tumut and Morwell have continued working.

The current union claim is for a 3 percent pay rise annually over three years, one week's annual leave allowable in the Christmas holiday period, and better access to income protection insurance. A CFMEU spokesman said the company wanted one nationwide agreement for all its sites and has imposed a 2 percent pay increase at its Tumut and Morwell mills.

Coats Hire workers and union accept wage cut

Unions at Australia's largest equipment hire firm Coats Hire have accepted a new enterprise agreement that provides below-inflation wage rises and allows the employer to pay new staff 18 percent less. Coats Hire said it would rip up the existing agreement and force workers onto the vastly inferior industry award if the company's 900 workers did not accept the new agreement. Coats Hire workers are members of the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union.

The new agreement, which followed a two-year wage freeze, contains a \$1,000 sign-on bonus, two 1.5 percent pay rises in 2018 and 2019, improved entitlements for domestic-violence and paid-parental leave. It also includes a two-tiered pay system in which all new employees will receive 18 percent less pay, one week less in annual leave and reduced penalty rates.

While workers rejected two previous management "offers," the union refused to mobilise workers to fight the company attack and its two-tier award.



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