

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

10 June 2017

Indonesia: Mass sackings continue at Freeport mine

More than 3,000 striking workers have now been fired at PT Freeport's Grasberg mine in Papua, Indonesia. Several hundred more have been dismissed from PT Smelting, a joint venture between Freeport and Mitsubishi that processes copper from Grasberg. Freeport escalated the sackings at the end of May after the Chemical, Energy and Mining Workers Union (SP-KEP) announced that its 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 is issuing "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.

Prior to commencement of the strike the company laid off (furloughed) thousands of employees claiming it was necessary 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.

Pakistan: Government hospital nurses in Quetta on strike

Nurses from government hospitals in Quetta, the provincial capital of Balochistan, walked off the job on Monday and demonstrated outside the Civil Hospital saying they would not resume duties until their demands were met. The nurses ended a four-day strike in February over the same issues after the government falsely claimed that all their demands would be met "without delay" and promised a government committee to "find a solution."

The nurses want a health professional allowance and improvement in their service structure. A Nurses Action Committee (NAC) spokesperson said that nurses had been demanding the health professional allowance

since 2011. She said despite acceptance of the demand the government had so far not issued an official order. Nurses want the service structure and professional allowance on par with neighbouring provinces.

NAC and Balochistan Nurses Association representatives have said that nurses would protest outside the provincial assembly on the eve of the budget session and hold rallies in Quetta if their demands were not resolved soon. The nurses were still on strike on Wednesday.

Public school teachers in Sindh province protest

Around 300 public school teachers in Sindh province demonstrated outside the Sindh Assembly in Karachi on Monday to demand release of their salaries, which they have not received since their recruitment in 2012. Teachers complained that around 3,850 teachers were recruited at the time but following the 2013 elections, which brought a change of government, the recruitments were declared illegal and salaries stopped.

Pakistani teachers are heavily exploited and survive by working part-time jobs after school hours. The teachers who have not been terminated and are performing their teaching duties have been isolated by the major teaching unions.

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa college professors and lecturers protest

Hundreds of professors and lecturers from state-run colleges in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa demonstrated in Peshawar on June 1 over government delays in upgrading pay-scales and allowances. Their action followed demonstrations in November over the same issues. The professors and lecturers are demanding their pay-scales be brought into line with other government employees, including university teachers, and for teaching assistants and ad-hoc lecturers to be made permanent.

The 6,000 teaching staff affected are represented by the Pakhtunkhwa College Teachers Association and the Pakhtunkhwa Professors and Lecturers Association, which accused the government of failing to honour commitments made in November and again in May to address their demands.

Punjab municipal workers continue protests over pay

Municipal workers and retired employees of the Municipal Committee in Toba Tek Singh district protested on Monday and Tuesday to demand

the district government distribute wages and pensions for the past two months. Police intervened when protesters demanded to meet with government officials.

Workers said that if their salaries were not paid soon they would lock down the council premises, shut off city water supplies and boycott street-cleaning and other sanitary work.

Tata Motors workers in Gujarat protest

Around 450 workers at Tata Motors car manufacturing plant in Sanand, Gujarat are boycotting the company's food canteen in protest over extended negotiations for a new work agreement [long term settlement (LTS)]. Workers are demanding a higher wage offer for the first year of the agreement. Their union claims that the company has dragged out negotiations for 18 months.

According to media reports, Tata is attempting to sign up workers at its plants in Sanand, Lucknow and Jamshedpur to the same performance-based LTS that the union accepted at its Pune plant in March. The Pune agreement covers three years with annual pay increases totalling 8,600 rupees, plus 8,700 rupees in bonuses. At least 10 percent of their pay is linked to performance.

Karnataka health workers strike

At least 200 Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHAs) in Bengaluru held a one-day strike on June 5 to demand eight months' unpaid wages and the issuing of identity cards. The workers, who are supposed to be paid a meagre 5,000 rupees per month, including allowances, are trained social workers. They administer vaccines door-to-door and provide health education under the National Urban Health Mission (NUHM). The striking workers said they had been told by the NUHM that they were no longer listed as employees on its new software.

Cambodian garment workers strike

More than 1,000 workers from the Southland hat factory in Dangkor district, Cambodia walked off the job on Tuesday after the company announced they would lose three days' pay for taking time off to vote in the communal elections. Cambodian workers usually are granted time to travel to their home town to vote in elections.

While the company said workers would be paid as usual, three days would be cut from their holiday entitlement. Workers complained that when they previously approached management to see if they could take time off to vote they did not get a clear answer. The workers were still refusing to return to work on Wednesday.

New South Wales coal mine workers on strike

Around 1,400 workers at Glencore coal mines in the Hunter Valley, north of Sydney walked off the job for 48 hours on Thursday affecting

five sites, with another 48 hour strike beginning next Tuesday and impacting on seven sites. The protected industrial action followed rolling two-hour stoppages at several mines last weekend.

A Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) representative said that several enterprise agreements expired in 2012 and 2014 and that wages have been frozen since then. Workers rejected a proposed 2 percent annual pay rise from Glencore, saying that it did not make up for no pay increases since their agreements ended.

The CFMEU wants a guarantee that permanent positions are not to be threatened by the use of casual contract labour. It alleged that Glencore is increasingly using contract labour and in some mines it is as high as 50 percent.

The union also wants Glencore to match other redundancy agreements in the region which calculate payments using the average rostered hours of employees rather than the current base 35-hour week. The miners work 12-hour shifts—a 44-hour week—which they say should be the basis of redundancy calculations.

Far-north Queensland bus drivers strike

Drivers from commuter service provider Sunbus Cairns, in far-north Queensland, walked off the job for 48 hours on Tuesday in a dispute over a proposed enterprise agreement. Their action followed two 24-hour strikes in October and February over the stalled negotiations.

The Transport Workers Union (TWU) members want a pay rise and the same conditions as other regional drivers. The union claims that Sunbus drivers in Cairns are paid between two and four dollars an hour less than their counterparts in the state.

Sunbus has offered a 2.8 percent annual pay increase with productivity increases. The TWU wants a first-year increase of 6.1 percent. Sunbus claimed that Translink, the state government authority, does not provide enough funding to meet the drivers' pay demand.

Queensland power station workers vote for strike action

NRG workers at the Gladstone Power Station in Queensland have voted to strike in their eight-month dispute for a new enterprise bargaining agreement (EBA). Some 99 percent of the power plant's 160 workers rejected the company's proposed EBA in April. Last month NRG responded by applying to the Fair Work Commission (FWC) to terminate the current EBA, which, if successful, would force workers onto an inferior industry award with severely reduced wages and conditions.

Last week members of the Services Union, Australian Manufacturing Workers Union, Electrical Trades Union and the Australian Workers Union overwhelmingly voted for industrial action. Management and unions were to meet with the FWC last Wednesday for a conciliation hearing regarding the EBA. No date has been set for industrial action.

NRG is claiming its offer contains no changes to current wages, hours, leave, superannuation and other benefits to existing employees and that all award protections such as consultation and redundancy provisions are maintained. Workers claim, however, that the agreement offer is two-tiered and that if accepted would allow the company to employ new recruits on contract and on reduced wages and conditions.

Department of Agriculture workers to vote on pay deal

Over 4,000 federal public servants at Australia's Department of Agriculture will vote this month on a proposed enterprise agreement (EA), which they have rejected four times over three years of negotiations. Voting starts next Tuesday and ends on June 16.

The department's offer includes a 6 percent pay rise—all of it to be paid in the first 18 months of the three-year deal—but in return for stricter control over sick-leave and other productivity gains. The pay "increase" in effect is a pay cut considering these workers have not had a pay rise for three years.

The Community and Public Sector Union said it expected its members will reject the offer, citing concerns about the loss of a public holiday at Christmas, the removal of consultation rights on rostering, and the end of job permanency at the department.

The dispute in the Department of Agriculture is part of a three-year conflict over proposed EAs covering 160,000 federal public sector workers. Nearly 75 percent have rejected the government's multiple offers. The Liberal-National federal government wants all federal public sector annual wage increases capped at 2 percent and that these be combined with cuts in benefits or working conditions. It has also declared that there will be no back-pay from the last agreement.



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