

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

22 July 2017

Freeport Indonesia workers remain on strike

At least 4,000 workers at PT Freeport's Grasberg mine in Papua, Indonesia have now been sacked after two-and-a-half months of strike action. Several hundred more have been dismissed from PT Smelting, a joint venture between Freeport and Mitsubishi that processes copper from Grasberg, the third largest copper mine in the world.

More than 8,000 permanent and contract workers at the mine struck on May 1 over 2,000 previous lay-offs. Freeport claimed that the industrial action was illegal, that strikers were absent without leave and all those who had struck for five days would lose their jobs. The company issued "voluntary resignation" notices with a final payment of just one month's salary. Workers were told they would not be reemployed.

Freeport claimed that the sackings prior to the strike were necessary due to production cuts caused by an ongoing contract dispute with the Indonesian government. Under new 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.

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.

The Indonesian government announced last week that it would "facilitate negotiations" between the union and the company. Freeport meanwhile is attempting to reach agreement with the Indonesian government which guarantees mining rights at Grasberg until 2041.

South Korean auto assembly workers vote to strike

A total of 87,000 workers at GM Korea, Hyundai Motor and sister company Kia Motors have voted to strike following stalled negotiations over new contracts.

Some 65 percent of the more than 50,000 union members at Hyundai Motor's Ulsan plant voted on July 14 for strike action and on Monday 72 percent of Kia's 28,200 workforce ratified strike action. Their unions, which are affiliated to the Korean Metal Workers Union (KMWU), want the monthly basic wage increased by 154,883 won (\$US136) and 30 percent of the company's 2016 full-year net profit as a bonus.

On July 7 over 11,000 GM Korea workers voted 79 percent in favour of striking. The GM union, also affiliated with the KMWU, is demanding the same pay increase as Hyundai and Kia workers plus 500 percent of their basic wages or 4.25 million won as a bonus. Other demands include the implementation of a salary system instead of hourly wages and an 8+8 shift schedule, with an eight-hour second shift.

Contract negotiations are currently occurring at Renault Samsung Motors and SsangYong Motors.

Filipino jeepney drivers hold more strikes

Five hundred jeepney drivers in the Philippines' capital Manila struck on Monday over government plans to phase out passenger jeepneys 15 years or older. The strike followed national stoppages in February and May over the issue. The industrial action was coordinated by PISTON, Stop and Go Coalition and the No to Jeepney Phase-out Coalition. Strikes were also held in several districts on the island of Luzon.

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 called for an upgrade of their jeepneys and improved enforcement of road-worthiness rules.

Under the draft plan, a jeepney operator will be required to have 7 million pesos (\$US140,393) for a franchise, have 20 units by 2018 and double that number the following year and install GPS and wi-fi into the vehicles. The jeepney phase-out, which was due to begin in July, will impact over 600,000 drivers and 250,000 operators.

Bangladesh: Police attack protesting textile workers

A demonstration by 2,000 textile workers on the Dhaka-Barisal highway was attacked by police using teargas and batons on July 14. At least 18 workers and two policemen were injured.

The demonstration was sparked when workers at the Madaripur Spinning Mill heard of a decision by the district administration to shut down the mill due to a loan default. Factory management said employees had not been paid the last two-and-a-half months' wages and benefits and claimed that they were ordered by the district administration to shut down without any prior notice.

Bangladeshi river transport workers call strike

River transport workers employed on privately-owned ships and vessels carrying cargo and passengers will begin an indefinite strike from July 23 if employers fail to meet 21 demands made by the Bangladesh Nourjan Sramik Federation.

These include the issuing of appointment letters, identity cards and service books to all workers, an end to the harassment of workers by filing legal cases against them for accidents, overloading of boats and other charges, and the prevention of extortion and robbery on waterways.

A major demand in the union memorandum handed to the prime minister's office on July 12 was for the repatriation of eight transport workers detained in an Indian jail since March 22 and the immediate release of eight other workers tried and convicted following the capsizing of the MV Koko-4 passenger ferry and death of 81 people in November 2009. Workers accused the government and ship owners of scapegoating workers to cover up the continuous violation of basic safety rules and regulations.

India: Kerala nurses continue state-wide strike over wages

About 80,000 private hospital nurses in Kerala took mass leave on Thursday in defiance of an Essential Services Maintenance Act (ESMA) ruling that their industrial action was illegal. United Nurses Association (ANU) members decided to take action following failed mediation talks with the government and the Private Hospitals Association on Wednesday.

ANU nurses from 326 private hospitals and striking members of the Indian Nurses Association (INA) at government hospitals want a 20,000-rupee (\$US314) minimum monthly wage. The nurses rejected a 17,500-rupee pay offer, which included allowances, from the government and private hospitals.

The current 9,500-rupee monthly minimum wage for nurses was established in 2013. Nurses claim that most hospitals are paying below this. Private hospital nurses claim that some hospitals keep them as trainees indefinitely and only pay a 6,500-rupee monthly stipend.

Thousands of UNA nurses marched to the Secretariat in Kochi on Thursday and joined up with INA members who are holding a hunger strike. Some private hospitals have begun hiring nurses without pay, promising to issue them with working certificates.

Delhi rural health workers strike

Thousands of anganwadi (rural health) workers are maintaining strike action begun on June 30 despite a recent assurance from the government that their demand for a pay and allowance increase will be granted within a week. The rural health workers accused the government of making false promises, recalling that, "Such verbal assurances were given even in 2015 but nothing changed."

A Delhi Anganwadi Worker-Helper Association spokesperson said that their wages have not increased since 2015 when they were being paid 5,000 rupees per month and helpers 2,500 rupees. The workers want the minimum wage brought into line with a March 3 notification issued by the government—13,350 rupees, 14,698 and 16,182 rupees for unskilled, semi-skilled and skilled labour respectively.

There are around 11,000 anganwadi centres in Delhi employing about 22,000 workers and helpers.

Andhra Pradesh municipal workers end strike

Striking contract workers from the Greater Visakhapatnam Municipal Corporation (GVMC) ended a three-day strike on July 14 after the corporation offered a pay increase and suspended its plan to privatise sanitation services.

Called by the GVMC Contract Workers Union, the strike was part of state-wide action coordinated by the Joint Action Committee and Centre for Indian Trade Unions to oppose the Andhra Pradesh government's proposed sanitation privatisation order GO279.

GVMC gave an assurance that the monthly pay scale will be set at 12,000, 15,000 and 17,500 rupees for unskilled, semi-skilled and skilled workers respectively. Permanent workers were promised health cards and pensions.

Mumbai bus drivers vote on strike

Some 36,000 employees of Mumbai's commuter bus fleet are voting to decide whether they will strike over irregular wage payments from their state-employer BEST. Workers are demanding that the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) bail out the cash-strapped BEST, prevent entry of buses on "wet lease," a form of outsourcing, and stop the administration from cutting salaries and allowances.

BEST workers struck on June 22 over unpaid wages after BMC refused to fully implement a court order directing it to pay overdue wages. BEST had paid only 50 percent of the wages. A company spokesman told the media that it had no funds to pay all the wages. BEST was forced to pay overdue wages in March after workers threatened to strike for their pay.

Pakistan: Government employees protest

Pakistan Public Works Department workers demonstrated this week to demand the immediate payment of wages. Workers in Islamabad, who were protesting for several days outside the department headquarters, have not been paid for three months.

In Peshawar, 1,200 employees protested inside a department office building on Tuesday holding banners and placards denouncing the government for ignoring their living conditions. They threatened to lock down the offices and launch a protest campaign if wages were not immediately paid. The lockdown of offices was avoided by the department management promising to resolve the issue.

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa welfare board workers demand permanency

Contract employees of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Workers Welfare Board have been demonstrating outside the Peshawar Press Club since July 5 for permanent jobs. The protest is part of a long-running campaign, which began in 2013. At least 3,000 employees are affected.

The protesting workers demanded that the government act on a Supreme Court decision which declared their contracts should be no longer than one year. The current government has refused to give permanent jobs to those appointed during tenure of the previous government. Workers said they would continue their protest until they are all made permanent.

Punjab state-government hospital doctors protest

Doctors from eight state government hospitals demonstrated in Lahore and Rawalpindi on July 13 with several demands, including permanency and a new service structure previously agreed to. The Young Doctors' Association (YDA) members also want the withdrawal of the central induction policy imposed by the Punjab government.

In Rawalpindi, doctors at the Benazir Bhutto Hospital, Holy Family Hospital and District Headquarter Hospital demonstrated and blocked traffic on major city roads. They oppose delays in appointing doctors to hospitals, poor conditions of hostels, shortage of necessary facilities in hospitals and harassments and the victimisation of doctors.

A similar protest in Lahore affected the General Hospital, Childrens Hospital, Mayo Hospital, Jinnah Hospital and Punjab Institute of Cardiology. Outpatient departments at these hospitals were partially closed because of the protests.

Cambodian bicycle workers strike

Around 2,000 workers at the A&J (Cambodia) bicycle factory in Svay Rieng stopped work on Monday and Tuesday to protest the owner's proposed scrapping of a \$100 annual bonus. A \$25 bonus is paid quarterly to each worker if they do not strike or join protests.

Workers complained that the company increasingly refused to pay the bonus if workers' missed a day's work and that the bonus has now been abolished. Management told the media it would discuss the issue with workers.

Brisbane bus drivers strike

Bus drivers from the Brisbane City Council walked off the job for two hours on Tuesday and Wednesday over the council's proposed enterprise agreement (EA). Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) members want the EA to include improved safety, a say in shift arrangements and a better pay offer.

The council's offer included 2.5 percent annual pay increases over three years, back-pay and a signing bonus of \$400. The council responded to the strike by offering to double the number of council-funded security guards and survey drivers on other improvements to safety. It said, however, that it would not increase the pay offer or negotiate on the roster issue.

An RTBU spokesman said the pay offer did not address their claim for increasing the hourly rate of drivers to a decent level and said the drivers deserved an input into rostering schedules.

Australian meteorological staff on strike

Bureau of Meteorology (BoM) staff began three weeks of rolling strikes on Thursday in a dispute over the government's proposed enterprise agreement (EA). The BoM has over 1,600 staff and maintains 50 field offices. Housing was provided to staff and their dependents at 15 remote locations. Up to one third of the bureau's staff will participate in the

protected industrial action.

The Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) members will stop work without notice in the early mornings and evenings, refuse to answer phone calls, and not respond to non-urgent media inquiries.

A CPSU spokesperson said the dispute was due to the bureau's failure to provide a pay rise over three years, and its plan to cut allowances for staff in remote locations.

The majority of the 160,000 federal public servants have been in dispute with the Liberal-National government for more than three years over proposed new work agreements. The government has demanded all annual wage increases for federal public sector workers be capped at 2 percent and that these be combined with cuts in benefits or working conditions and without any back-pay from the previous agreement.

In recent weeks workers at the Australian Tax Office, the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet Staff, the Department of Defence, the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation and the Department of Agriculture and Water Resources have accepted agreements they previously rejected.

These results are the direct outcome of the CPSU leadership which has divided federal public sector workers along department lines and confined all industrial action to limited stoppages and protests to wear down workers' resistance.



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