

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

29 July 2017

Freeport Indonesia workers extend strike for another month

The Chemical, Energy and Mining Workers Union (SP-KEP), which covers striking workers at PT Freeport's Grasberg copper and gold mine in Papua, Indonesia, announced on July 21 that the three-month strike would be extended for another month. More than 8,000 permanent and contract workers at the mine struck on May 1 over 2,000 previous layoffs.

At least 4,000 strikers are now sacked since 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.

Freeport claimed that the pre-strike sackings were in response to production cuts caused by an ongoing contract dispute with the Indonesian government. The present export license expires in October. The government is requiring divestment of a 51 percent stake, a second copper smelter be built, arbitration rights relinquished and new taxes and royalties to be paid for the new permit. 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 massive open cut and underground copper/gold mine produced more than 500,000 tonnes of copper and over 1 million ounces of gold in 2016. Freeport is attempting to reach agreement with the Indonesian government to extend mining rights at Grasberg until 2041.

South Korea: Kumho tire factory workers protest

Kumho Tire Company workers demonstrated outside the ruling Minju Party's office in Gwangju on July 18 to protest the planned sale of the company to the Chinese firm Qingdao Doublestar. A spokesman from the workers' joint committee, representing 2,900 Kumho employees and many other workers in the supply chain, claimed the sale would result in the transfer of some production volume to China and lead to layoffs.

Qingdao Doublestar has a global capacity of 55 million units in eight plants—three in South Korea and five in the United States, China and Vietnam. Protesting workers and subcontractors have threatened they will go on strike if the tire maker's creditors, which include the state-run Korea Development Bank, do not stop the sale.

Migrant workers in South Korea protest

A group of 70 migrant workers from the construction and manufacturing

sectors demonstrated outside the Bupyeong subway station in Incheon on July 23 with a list of five demands for the Ministry of Labor and Employment. These include halting the forceful arrest and deportation of workers who overstay their visas, establishment of a work-permit system that recognises them as legal employees with the same rights and benefits as local workers.

The workers said that they do not receive the same wages as local employees for the same jobs. A construction worker told the media that his pay was half that of local construction workers. A manufacturing worker from Myanmar (Burma) complained that her contract said she had to pay rent but there were no restrictions on what the employer charged her.

A Korean Migrant Worker' Union representative although said the country's minimum wage would be raised by 16.4 percent next year it was unlikely this increase would be given migrant workers.

South Korean auto unions delay strike action

Unions affiliated to the Korean Metal Workers Union (KMWU) and covering auto-assembly workers at GM Korea, Hyundai Motor and its sister company Kia Motors have decided to delay planned strike action. A total of 87,000 workers at GM, Hyundai and Kia plants voted to strike following stalled negotiations over new contracts.

Unions at Hyundai and Kia want the monthly basic wage increased by 154,883 won (\$US136) and 30 percent of the company's 2016 full-year net profit paid as a bonus. GM Korea workers want the same pay rise plus 500 percent of their basic wages as a bonus. Other demands include a new salary system instead of hourly wages and an 8+8 shift schedule with an eight-hour second shift.

The unions have not explained why they decided to postpone the planned strike.

Chinese electric-tool manufacturing workers end strike

Some 2,000 workers at Zama Precision Industry at Shenzhen in southeastern China ended a two-week strike in early July with no resolution to demands. The company is wholly-owned by German power-tool giant Stihl.

Workers struck on June 26, demonstrated within the factory grounds and blocked exits to prevent the shipment of goods and relocation of equipment after Zama refused to consider their demands. The following day, riot police with dogs entered the plant. Five workers were arrested and over a dozen injured with pepper spray.

The workers began organising throughout the factory in April when they learnt that the company planned to relocate. Their demands covered health and safety grievances, social insurance and severance payments. Management refused to pay compensation of any kind, demanding that workers either sign new contracts with the company or voluntarily resign.

Hundreds of workers quit after the police attacks but are still waiting for severance pay and other compensation.

India: Delhi metro rail workers win gains

A planned July 24 strike by non-executive employees of Delhi Metro Rail Corporation (DMRC) was cancelled by the workers' staff council on Sunday after negotiations with government and corporation. DMRC management announced on Sunday evening that all the issues raised by workers were "amicably" settled.

The planned walk out by 9,000 workers, including station staff, train drivers, controllers, technicians and other employees, followed several months of sit-down protests at various Metro stations demanding better wages. Workers were falsely promised a pay increase in 2015.

The basic pay of non-executive staff varies from 8,000 rupees to 14,410 rupees (\$US125 to \$225) a month while that of an executive staff member is over 20,600 rupees.

The staff council demanded entry-level wages increase to 10,170 rupees and the higher limit set at 18,700 rupees. Other demands included the right to form a union and withdrawal of disciplinary action against three protest leaders.

BSNL workers to hold national strike

Workers at the state-owned telecommunications provider Bharat Sanchar Nigam Limited (BSNL) have called a one-day national strike for July 27 demanding a 15 percent pay increase. A union spokesman said a wage rise was due in January.

While the recommendation of the third Pay Revision Committee was approved by the government on July 19 the rise was not paid because only those public sector enterprises which make a profit during the last three financial years are allowed to increase wages.

The union claimed that BSNL became a loss-making entity because of the anti-BSNL measures adopted by the government. The company was not allowed to procure equipment for its mobile network expansion from 2006 to 2012, which benefited the private telecos.

Tamil Nadu power generating workers to strike

Contract workers at the government-owned power generating utility Neyveli Lignite Corporation (NLC) announced this week that they will strike on August 3 over several outstanding demands. The Labour Progressive Federation, which is attached to the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) party, and the Centre for Indian Trade Unions (CITU) said about 13,000 contract workers will participate in the indefinite strike.

The unions' demands include job permanency and an increase in the number of working days from 19 to 26 per month.

About 5,000 NLC contract workers affiliated with the All India Trade

Union Congress are maintaining strike action which began on July 12 over the same issues. Workers rejected management's offer of 21 days' work a month.

Unions representing 11,000 permanent workers, however, have refused to support the contract workers and immediately declared that their members would not participate in the walkout.

Bangladeshi river transport unions call off strike

Unions representing river transport workers on privately-owned cargo and passenger ships and vessels called off a scheduled national strike on Sunday evening, just two hours before the walkout was due to begin.

Union leaders told workers that the government, vessel owners and the unions signed an agreement at a tripartite meeting. Detail of the deal, however, have not been made public.

The Nou Paribahan Shramik Federation and the Nou Shramik Union presented 21 demands. These included the release of 16 workers detained in Bangladesh and Indian jails, the issuing of appointment letters, identity cards and service books and the payment of outstanding wages and benefits as per the government-declared minimum wage.

Pakistan train drivers return to work

An indefinite strike by over 270 Pakistan Railway drivers on Saturday over wages was called off 18 hours later by the Train Drivers Welfare Association.

The government authorities threatened trainee drivers and contract drivers with dismissal if they supported the striking workers. In a major act of intimidation, Pakistan police began arresting workers, including up to six drivers from Rawalpindi and eight from Karachi, on bogus anti-terrorism charges.

The striking drivers demanded a pay rise, overtime wages, higher allowances and the reinstatement of drivers summarily sacked by authorities.

Abbottabad student nurses strike

Student nurses from the District Headquarters Hospital in Abbottabad boycotted duties on July 22 and demonstrated outside the hospital demanding five months unpaid wages and that the current 5,000 rupees (\$US47.47) monthly wage be increased to 20,000 rupees. This would bring them in par with their counterparts in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province.

Nursing students complained that the authorities repeatedly ignored the issues raised and demanded a solution in a week or threatened further strike action.

Faisalabad power loom workers protest

Power loom workers in Faisalabad, Punjab province demonstrated

outside the Zila Council on Tuesday to demand pay rises and the provision of health and social security benefits. Rallies started at different parts of the city with the power-loom workers denouncing the government and factory owners. Workers accused the government of repeatedly dishonouring promises to resolve their demands.

Protesters told the media that wages had not kept up with inflation and that it was becoming impossible to live. The action was coordinated by the Labour Qaumi Movement, which covers power loom and brick kiln workers.

Myanmar: Yangon bus workers protest

About 200 bus conductors and drivers from the Yangon Bus Service (YBS) marched in Shwe Pyi Thar township on July 20 against a plan to eliminate conductors' jobs. The Yangon Region Transport Authority had ruled that all YBS buses must install cash boxes by July 20 to replace fare collections by bus conductors. YBS has close to 4,000 buses, with twice that number of conductors.

Workers complained that they only learnt of the plan on July 15 and said they want the government to arrange for new jobs for the conductors.

Queensland: Glencore recruits contract workers during lockdown

Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) members at Glencore's Oaky North underground coal mine in Central Queensland have been locked out since June 9, following limited industrial action over an enterprise agreement (EA). Glencore has legally brought in a replacement, contract-based workforce and has used staff employees to perform production duties. It claimed the mine was maintaining normal production and the lockdown would not be lifted until July 28.

CFMEU members began limited strike action on May 10 in the form of rolling four-hour stoppages after rejecting the company's proposed EA. The union claims that Glencore wants to reduce workers' pay and conditions and impose new rostering arrangements.

The CFMEU has indicated that it is willing to sacrifice members' wages. The company has offered a zero pay rise and two-year rollover of the existing agreement.

Glencore and other mine operators are restructuring the industry, increasingly using casual and contract workers to cut costs. According to a union survey, casualisation in Queensland mines stands at 10.3 percent, nearly double the level in any other industry.

Brisbane bus drivers strike again

Following a failed meeting on Thursday, Brisbane City Council bus drivers walked off the job last Friday afternoon over the council's proposed enterprise agreement. The action followed two-hour stoppages on Tuesday and Wednesday a week earlier. Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) members want the agreement to include improved safety, a say in shift arrangements and higher pay.

The council's offer included 2.5 percent annual pay increases over three years, backpay and a \$400 bonus. The council responded to the strike by offering to double the number of council-funded security guards and

survey drivers and other improvements to safety. It has refused to negotiate on higher pay or rosters.

An RTBU spokesman said management's offer did not address demands for replacement of the outdated pay structure and an increase in the hourly rates for lower-ranked drivers or allow any input into rostering schedules.

Sunbus drivers in Queensland strike

Sunbus drivers on Queensland's Sunshine Coast and in Cairns walked off the job between 10 a.m. and 2 p.m. on Thursday over Sunbus's proposed enterprise agreements. Transport Workers Union (TWU) members on the Sunshine Coast, north of Brisbane, want a 12 percent pay increase in the first year of the agreement to bring them in line with their colleagues in Brisbane, retention of current conditions and improved safety. Sunbus claimed the pay demand was unrealistic and wants productivity increases. The strike followed four months of negotiations.

Strike action by TWU members in Cairns, in the state's far north, followed 18 months of negotiations and strikes in October, February and July. Drivers want their wages brought into line with Brisbane drivers and conditions similar to other regional drivers.

Sunbus Cairns 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.

Victorian oil workers' unions wind down protest over new contracts

Oil production workers at Esso's onshore facilities in Victoria and offshore platforms in Bass Strait are maintaining a protest camp established in mid-June outside ExxonMobil's Longford gas plant in Victoria. The company is attempting to impose new maintenance contracts which could reduce wages by 30 percent and see the loss of hard-won working conditions.

The Esso workers are members of the Electrical Trades Union (ETU), the Australian Manufacturing Workers' Union (AMWU) and the Australian Workers' Union (AWU).

Esso recently awarded a five-year maintenance contract to UGL, but according to the unions, workers were told that they had to sign up with MTCT Services, a UGL subsidiary, at significantly lower wages or risk losing their jobs. The unions claim that 200 workers face redundancy. The new contract also allows MTCT to introduce two-week fly-in, fly-out rosters as opposed to the current seven-day rosters.

Following threats of court action against pickets by MTCT, the unions said that they would wind-down members' protests and on July 21 began dismantling protest banners and other picket equipment. So far 20 workers have signed up to the new contracts.

Solomon Island doctors withdraw strike notice

The Solomon Islands Medical Association (SIMA) withdrew its 28-day strike notice on July 21, the day it matured, after signing a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with the government. However, the MOU does

not resolve the doctors' grievances. The document gives the government four months to revise the doctors' service scheme—in effect stalling industrial action until 2018.

Government hospital doctors issued the strike notice following six months of failed negotiations for a review of their work agreement. A SIMA representative said that the doctors are working under an agreement that has not changed since 2005.



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