

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

26 August 2017

Freeport Indonesia workers clash with police

Hundreds of sacked workers from Freeport Indonesia's Grasberg gold and copper mine in West Papua, Indonesia were attacked by police on August 19 when they attempted to blockade the mine entrance and force the company to negotiate. Several miners were injured with rubber bullets, and office buildings and a number of vehicles were set alight.

More than 8,000 permanent and contract workers at the mine struck on May 1 over 2,000 previous lay-offs. At least 4,000 strikers are now sacked after Freeport claimed that the industrial action was illegal. Workers and their families have been without income, access to credit, accommodation, education or medical care for four months, and several people are believed to have died as a result.

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 required divestment of a 51 percent stake, the building of a second copper smelter, arbitration rights relinquished and new taxes and royalties paid for the new permit.

The Indonesian government announced last week that Freeport's contract to run the mine had been extended until 2041 after the company agreed to divest 51 percent of its shares to Indonesian entities and construct an additional copper smelter.

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.

Uber drivers in Indonesia strike

Uber drivers across Indonesia stopped work on August 20 to demand better pay and conditions. Around 200 drivers demonstrated in the Jakarta while drivers unable to participate in demonstrations in other cities showed solidarity by turning off their Uber communication radios. The action followed two protests in May.

Drivers said they face the same main grievances that have led to protest action in other cities around the world. They complained that Uber unilaterally determines basic pay rates and there is lack of clarity of drivers' employment status.

The drivers issued a list of 14 demands, including a basic rate of 2,500 rupiah (19 US cents) per km, an end to high commissions and fees, and the provision of office administration and safety support. A delegation of 10 drivers met with management, but was denied access for their legal advisor.

The drivers have organised themselves into the KUMAN drivers collective. They held a mass meeting on Tuesday to discuss the concession and next steps in the dispute.

South Korea: Workers at Kia Motors strike

Unionised workers at Kia Motors held limited strike action on Tuesday after the company's 28,240-strong union and management failed to reach agreement over wages and other benefits in collective bargaining negotiations.

Auto unions at Kia Motors and sister company Hyundai Motor, which are affiliated to the Korean Metal Workers Union, want their monthly basic wage increased by 154,883 won (\$US136) and 30 percent of the company's 2016 full-year net profit as a bonus. They also want their regularly paid bonuses to be counted as part of the basic salary.

The auto union took legal action in late 2011 over whether regular bonuses were part of workers' basic wage. The Seoul Central District Court is considering the case and was expected to announce its decision on Thursday.

Migrant workers in Seoul protest

Around 500 migrant workers demonstrated in downtown Seoul on Sunday demanding abolition of the Employment Permit System (EPS). The protest was sparked after a Nepali worker, forced to remain with his ill-treating employer, committed suicide earlier this month. The demonstration was organised by the Alliance for Migrants' Equality and Human Rights and Korean Confederation of Trade Unions.

Protesters complained that the EPS stops workers from changing their workplaces without their employer's agreement, forcing slave-like working conditions upon them. The EPS invites unskilled workers from 15 countries but they are only allowed to change their workplace three times during a three-year period.

A group of 70 migrant workers from the construction and manufacturing sectors demonstrated in Seoul in July over the treatment of migrant workers. They demanded an end to the arrest and deportation of workers who overstay their visas and called for establishment of a work-permit system that recognises them as legal employees with the same rights and benefits as local workers.

India: Public sector bank workers strike

Around one million bank employees held a national strike on Tuesday to oppose the privatisation and merger of public sector banks. Although private owned banks remained open, foreign exchange, import and export bill exchange and clearing house operations were affected. The All India Bank Employees Association (AIBEA), which includes nine unions, called the strike with a 17-point charter of demands.

Over one million public sector bank workers held a national strike in February over the same issues. Workers fear that a proposed merger of five state banks would result in the closure of a large number of branches, loss of employment opportunities and curtail banking services to common customers, particularly for the rural sector.

Delhi rail construction workers on strike

Around 1,600 construction workers employed in Phase III of the Delhi Metro Rail Corporation (DMRC) project are on strike to demand nine months' unpaid salaries. Sub-contractors have joined the strike saying they are in debt because they have not received payments from the main contractor FEMC Pratibha and DMRC. All work on the nine Phase III Metro Stations has ceased. Workers threatened to lie on the rail tracks and block rail services if they were not paid.

Tens of thousands of Tamil Nadu government employees walk out

Around 10,000 government employees responded to a strike call from the Joint Action Committee of Tamil Nadu Teachers Organisations and Government Employees Organisations (JACTO-GEO) on August 22. Workers from government offices and government run and aided schools staged protest marches in several regions of the state including in Pollachi, Valparai, Mettupalayam, Sulur, Annur and Kinathukadavu.

JACTO-GEO wants a new contributory pension scheme scrapped and the previous system restored. Workers complained that the new pension scheme does not benefit employees or their next of kin. JACTO-GEO has also called on the state government to implement the Eighth Pay Commission and provide a 20 percent interim relief payment.

JACTO-GEO has threatened to call an indefinite strike if its demands are not granted by September 7.

Sri Lanka: Southern Province health workers strike

Health workers affiliated to Supplementary Medical Services, including pharmacists, physiotherapists, occupational therapists, radiographers and nurses, struck for 48 hours on August 22 in the Southern Provinces. Their demands include higher overtime pay and implementation of long outstanding transfer orders. In addition to increased overtime pay, the striking nurses have called for the re-implementation Grade One and Supra Grade promotions back-dated to 2010, official residences for all nursing categories and changes in the attendance register.

The walkout was coordinated by the Supplementary Medical Services Joint Trade Union Federation, which includes 12 trade unions. Union leaders said that there was no government response to the strike and warned that further action would be taken if workers' grievances were not addressed.

Bangladeshi garment workers attacked by company goons

Over 50 garment workers from the Korean-owned Haesong Corporation were seriously injured after being attacked by alleged company hired goons during a demonstration outside their factory on August 16. A National Garment Workers Federation (NGWF) spokesperson said that union delegates were targeted and an NGWF organiser was kidnapped but released several hours later.

The demonstration is over Haesong's suspension of 218 workers on April 4 after they had demanded payment for last year's unused leave. After a protest in June the company promised to pay the suspended workers all entitlements by July 4 and then moved this deadline to August 4. The workers have still not been paid.

Swan Garments workers demonstrate in Bangladesh

Several hundred workers from Swan Garments at Uttara in Dhaka and Dody Export Wear in Gazipur demonstrated outside the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) in Dhaka on Wednesday, demanding unpaid wages and termination entitlements.

The Garment Workers' Trade Union Centre suspended the protest until August 28, after the BGMEA claimed it would settle the issue with the government as "early as possible."

Swan Garment workers said the owners suddenly shut the factory on April 2015 without paying its 1,300 workers. After workers began demonstrating, the government arranged for one month's salary and falsely assured them of full payment. Dody Export Wear workers said factory authorities then relocated their factory without informing its 600 employees. When some workers refused to move to the new factory, they were terminated without entitlements.

Terminated workers from Ericsson Bangladesh protest

Fifty sacked workers from Ericsson Bangladesh demonstrated outside the company's head office in Gulshan, Dhaka on Monday after being informed by email that they were terminated. Protesters demanded the company introduce a voluntary separation scheme.

A company source told the media that Ericsson has axed 250 permanent and temporary employees in the last 12 months to maintain its profits.

Pakistan: Power loom workers' union accepts reduced pay rise

The lockout of thousands of power loom workers in Faisalabad ended on August 19 after the unions accepted verbal assurances from factory owners to increase wages by 7.14 percent and to issue social security and health care cards within a month and a half. The locked out employees had been protesting outside the deputy commissioner's office since August 14.

Power loom workers from 17 industrial centres in Faisalabad were

locked out on August 7 after factory owners ignored a district commissioner's directive that loom workers' wages be increased by 10 percent. The order was in response to several weeks of protests and strike action by power loom workers. Workers also demanded health and social security benefits, better working conditions and facilities.

Queensland: Glencore mine lockout in eleventh week

Multinational mining giant Glencore is continuing its lockout of 190 Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) members at its Oaky North underground coal mine in Central Queensland. The CFMEU members have been locked out since June 9, following limited industrial action that began on May 10 over an enterprise agreement (EA). The lockout was due to be lifted on July 28 but has been extended twice by the company.

The union alleged that Glencore has stripped away 50 percent of working conditions from a version of an agreement that the Oaky North workforce previously rejected overwhelmingly. The CFMEU wants 3 percent per annum pay increases but indicated it would accept a two-year pay freeze if the current enterprise agreement was rolled over.

Glencore has hired a replacement, contract-based workforce and used staff employees to maintain production. It claims the mine is maintaining normal production.

Pathology workers' union shuts down strike in Victoria

The Health Workers Union, covering over 600 striking workers from Dorevitch Pathology's 300 facilities across Victoria, ordered its members back to work on Thursday as "an act of good faith." The union told workers that negotiations with the company would resume.

The union's return-to-work directive followed a state Labor government's announcement that it had applied to the Fair Work Commission to end industrial action, saying it was "threatening patient safety."

Dorevitch workers began an indefinite strike on August 18 in a decade-long dispute for a new enterprise agreement. The action followed the lockout of over 80 striking workers at 20 facilities in Gippsland two weeks earlier, followed by a 48-hour state-wide walkout. The union told Dorevitch management that if a fair pay rise was not offered and locked out workers able to return by August 19 there would be further strike action.

The strikers included laboratory assistants, cleaners, couriers, maintenance and clerical staff, who have not had a pay rise since their enterprise agreement expired in 2007. The company has refused to offer any increase and is demanding cuts to sick leave and other entitlements.

Queensland: Gold Coast council workers protest

About 200 Gold Coast City Council workers downed tools at midday on Tuesday and demonstrated outside the council building at Evandale in their dispute over a proposed new enterprise agreement. The protest coincided with a council meeting by the CEO to discuss council reform, cost cutting and job destruction.

The strike involved members from the seven unions that are demanding a 3.5 percent pay rise, guaranteed job security for temporary workers, less outsourcing and more control over work hours.

New South Wales truck drivers in Aldi protest

More than 500 truck drivers and Transport Workers Union (TWU) members demonstrated outside Aldi's Mt Druitt supermarket in Sydney's west on Thursday. The protesters accused the supermarket giant of endangering the safety of its truck drivers.

A TWU representative told the rally that Aldi pressures drivers into unsafe practices to meet tight deadlines, potentially resulting in fatigue, law breaches and speeding. He said low-cost contracts are forcing transport companies and drivers to not properly maintain vehicles and skip mandatory rest breaks.

Around 100 truck drivers and other transport workers demonstrated outside the supermarket giant's Adelaide distribution centre in Regent Park on August 16 over the same issue. A similar demonstration was held in May in Fremantle, Western Australia.

More than 2,500 truck drivers and other road users died in truck crashes in the 10 years to 2014 and there has been a 7 percent increase in road deaths involving articulated vehicles so far this year.



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