

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and New Zealand

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The *World Socialist Web Site* invites workers and other readers to contribute to this regular feature.

## Asia

### India: Odisha childcare workers demonstrate for pay increase

Thousands of anganwadi (childcare) workers demonstrated in Bhubaneswar, Odisha state on Monday, over longstanding demands for increased wages and recognition as government employees. The All Odisha Anganwadi Ladies Workers Association accused the government of not fulfilling its promises for higher wages, increased retirement age, 50 percent more supervisor positions, as well as summer holidays and pension benefits.

Workers want wages increased to 21,000 rupees (\$US278) per month and a minimum wage of 10,500-rupees for anganwadi helpers. Protesters called for the government to fulfil their demands during the winter session of parliament, which concludes on December 23.

### Tamil Nadu sanitation workers demand compensation for death of co-worker

Several hundred sanitation workers occupied the premises of the Tirunelveli Municipal Corporation in Tirunelveli, Tamil Nadu on Tuesday, demanding compensation for the family of a deceased worker. The contracted sanitation worker, 38-year-old Marimuthu, died in hospital after suffering a chest injury while impounding cattle that had strayed onto roads.

The Tirunelveli District Rural Development and Local Administration Employees Association demanded compensation of 2.5 million rupees (\$US33,143) for Marimuthu's family and employment for his wife.

Protesting workers also demanded to be made permanent. The corporation has only 200 permanent workers, with more than 1,000 workers on contract. The Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) participated in the protest.

### Punjab bus workers strike again in their fight for permanent jobs

Contract workers from 27 Punjab Roadways depots across Punjab state

walked off the job on Tuesday, demanding that the state government honour an agreement reached with a union in September.

The Punjab Roadways Punbus and PRTC Contract Workers Union, covering around 8,000 contract and outsourced workers from the state-owned Punjab Roadways and Pepsu Road Transport Corporation (PRTC), called off a nine-day strike in September after talks with the government. The workers were demanding permanent jobs, equal pay for equal work and that the bus fleet be increased from 2,500 to at least 10,000.

The union claimed in September it had reached a deal with the government on all workers' demands but nothing was concrete. A union leader told workers that the government promised that salaries would increase by 30 percent and then 5 percent every year. He said the government had "given its word" that the bus fleet would soon be increased by 900 buses, but had stalled on the main issue of permanent jobs.

### Ordnance factory workers strike against corporatisation

Workers from India's ordnance manufacturing units across the country began a three-day strike Wednesday, protesting changed working conditions following the corporatisation of the factories. The All-India Defence Employees Federation (AIDEF) said workers oppose the government's decision to corporatise 47 production units by bringing them under seven public sector units.

AIDEF complained that after corporatisation on October 1, although all 76,000 defence civilian workers remain Central government employees, the new corporations started issuing "whimsical and unilateral instructions without authority," changing workers' conditions.

Workers are demanding an assurance of regular payment of provident fund withdrawals, retention of the 44.75-hour week and settling of all pending interfactory/inter-directorate transfer cases.

### Resident doctors strike at Maharashtra government hospitals

Resident doctors at several government and private hospitals across Maharashtra stopped work in outpatient departments on December 6 as part of a nationwide protest to oppose the suspension of postgraduate medical admissions, which has resulted in workload being shared by two batches of residents, rather than three as the doctors demand.

Similar protests and strikes were held in other states.

The problem has arisen due to the postponement of the NEET-PG 2021 entrance exam, which usually takes place in January, but this year was postponed until September due to increasing COVID-19 cases across the

country. Admissions have been stayed by the Supreme Court, which has postponed until January 6 hearing petitions filed by students questioning the validity of resident seat allocation.

### **Andhra Pradesh contract sanitation workers strike**

Outsourced sanitation workers at the Tirumala Venkateswara Temple in Andhra Pradesh have been on strike since November 28, demanding direct employment by the Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanam (TTD). The TTD, a trust that manages temples in Andhra Pradesh, has ordered contractors to hire scabs to break the strike.

### **Heavy Engineering Corporation workers in Jharkhand strike**

About 3,000 workers from the government-owned Heavy Engineering Corporation (HEC) in Ranchi, Jharkhand state, have been on strike since December 2 over non-payment of wages for seven months.

The Hatia Kamgaar Union, the largest union covering HEC employees, said the strike was unlikely to end soon as senior management had refused to meet with it.

Workers complained that they have had to deal with late payment of wages since 2015. The company claimed to be in heavy debt and appealed to the central Indian Modi government for monetary assistance of 8,700 million rupees (\$US115.7 million) to pay wages.

### **Korea: Cosmetic store workers demonstrate in Seoul**

Members of the Chanel Korea labour union held a press conference in front of the company's office in Jung-gu, central Seoul, on Tuesday. The cosmetic store workers said they would walk out for an indefinite period from December 17 if the French luxury brand fails to pay overdue wages and make efforts to prevent sexual harassment in the workplace.

The union, which covers 390 store workers at 85 boutiques, claimed that holiday allowances have not been paid for two years.

Following the announcement, workers began a rolling one-person protest in front of the firm's Seoul office.

### **Australia and New Zealand**

#### **Sunbus drivers in Queensland hold second strike**

Following a 24-hour strike on November 24, about 150 drivers at Sunbus Sunshine Coast in southeast Queensland and 80 drivers from Marlin Coast Sunbus in Cairns, in the far north of the state, stopped work for 24 hours on Tuesday to demand higher pay and better conditions in a new enterprise agreement.

While Sunbus said it had reached agreement on 30 claims put by the Transport Workers Union (TWU), the union said the wage offer was unacceptable. According to the union, Sunbus has refused to offer a

reasonable wage increase, proposing a meagre 0.5 percent if workers gave up public holiday entitlements.

The TWU has kept the drivers separate from the bus and train drivers taking strike action in Sydney in the same week.

### **Strike by packaging manufacturing workers in Melbourne enters third week**

Over 100 workers from the packaging manufacturing plant of Graphic Packaging International (GPI) in Braeside, Melbourne have been on strike since November 24. Members of the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) are seeking better conditions and an improved pay increase in a new enterprise agreement. Workers rejected the company's latest offer of only \$0.45 on top of their current low hourly rate of \$22.46.

### **Hume City Council workers' union pushes sell-out deal**

The Australian Services Union (ASU), with 448 members at the Hume City Council (HCC) in northern Melbourne, is attempting to ram through a sell-out union-management enterprise agreement. After calling off strike action planned for Thursday, the union called a stopwork meeting at which it urged members to accept what amounts to a four-year pay cut.

Under the deal, workers would receive 2 percent annual pay increases, far short of the current 3 percent CPI inflation rate. The increase would be backdated to July 1.

The union heavily promoted the HCC's decision to drop its demands on performance criteria and its acceptance of clauses in the agreement relating to gender equality and working in inclement weather. Council workers are yet to vote on the proposed deal.

### **Plasterboard factory workers in Melbourne locked out after taking industrial action**

Around 60 members of the Construction Forestry Maritime Mining and Energy Union (CFMMEU) at the CSR Gyprock Yarraville plasterboard factory in Melbourne's western suburbs were locked out after implementing an overtime ban and a two-hour stoppage on November 25, in opposition to the company's proposed enterprise agreement. CSR told workers they would not be allowed back into the factory until they agreed to end all industrial action.

The production workers rejected the company's offer of a 2.5 percent annual pay increase, which is a pay cut compared to the current CPI of 3 percent. Workers are demanding 4 percent annual pay increases and pay parity with workers in other factories doing similar work. They say they are paid \$4.40 an hour less than other workers in the industry.

The current low wages are the result of previous deals between CSR and the CFMMEU. During the COVID-19 pandemic the union agreed to stall wage negotiations, effectively imposing an 18-month pay freeze. In addition, it convinced workers to give up their rostered days off, supposedly to help the company through the pandemic. Meanwhile, CSR boosted its profits by 30 percent in six months to \$86.6 million and raised its senior executives' annual remuneration packages by \$1.2 million to \$3.7 million.

Workers set up a picket outside the factory and say they would not return to work until their pay demand was met.

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### **Mental health workers in Victoria strike over exhaustive workload**

Mental health workers at the Victorian Institute of Forensic Mental Health (Forensicare) in Fairfield, a Melbourne suburb, stopped work for two hours on Tuesday in a dispute with the state Labor government over inadequate staffing levels, low pay and prolonged negotiations for a new enterprise agreement.

The Health and Community Services Union (HACSU) accused the government of dragging out two years of negotiations by not putting forward an offer for a new agreement. Workers are demanding a wage increase that recognises their skills and the dangerous nature of their work, and increased staffing levels to put an end to the intolerable workload, which is causing burnout and high staff turnover.

Workers complained that two years after a scathing review criticised Forensicare's staffing shortages, no attempt has been made to fix it. They pointed out that they have dealt with COVID-19 outbreaks, occupational violence and serious occupational health and safety issues, all while meeting the needs of consumers with complex mental health issues.

The HACSU has not said if further industrial action is planned.

### **New Zealand rail union cancels national strike**

The New Zealand Rail and Maritime Transport Union (RMTU) announced on Tuesday it had cancelled national strike action due next week after reaching a settlement with state-owned KiwiRail in a contract dispute.

Strike action by about 2,500 rail workers was announced in late November in support of an 8 percent pay increase. In a sign of rising anger over low wages and the cost of living, a postal ballot saw 1,420 workers vote in favour of striking, with just 81 against. The strike would have been the first national stoppage of the rail system since 1994.

South Island workers planned to strike on December 16, followed by the North Island on December 17. With rail operations run from the North Island, the stoppage on December 17 would have affected the whole country including freight, inter-Island ferries and commuter rail in Auckland and Wellington.

The details of the settlement are being kept secret until the agreement is ratified by union members next week. RMTU general secretary Wayne Butson pre-empted any decision by workers, telling the media he was satisfied an "appropriate outcome" had been reached and it "will be recognised by members as a fair one." The RMTU has a history of forcing through undemocratic decisions, including registering unreturned voting ballots as favouring the union's sell-out deals.

In a joint statement, Butson and KiwiRail acting CEO Todd Moyle declared that lifting the strike notice would "avoid further disruption to supply chains and passenger travel, and provide "a stable industrial environment into mid-2023."



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