

Workers Struggles: Asia and the Pacific

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

Workers from India's public sector banks hold two-day strike

Around 900,000 workers from public sector banks in India struck for two days beginning December 16 to protest against the government's decision to privatise two banks. The strike was organised by the United Forum of Bank Unions, an umbrella of nine bank unions, including the All India Bank Officers' Confederation, All India Bank Employees' Association and the National Organisation of Bank Workers.

The Modi government introduced the Banking Laws (Amendment) Bill, 2021, which facilitates the sell-off, during the current session of parliament as part of broader pro-investor reforms. In February, the finance minister announced two banks would be privatised as part of the government's \$US23.1 million disinvestment plan. The banks have not been named.

The government sold off the Industrial Development Bank of India (IDBI) in 2019 and merged 14 public sector banks in the past four years in preparation for further privatisation.

India: Punjab bus workers remain on strike in fight for permanent jobs

Contract workers from 27 depots of the Punjab Roadways and Pepsu Road Transport Corporation (PRTC) have been on strike since December 7 in their fight to be made permanent employees. About 90 percent of PRTC services are affected.

The Punjab Roadways Punbus and PRTC Contract Workers Union, covering around 8,000 contract and outsourced workers, called off a nine-day strike in September. The union claimed the government had agreed to meet workers' demands, which included permanent jobs, pay rises, equal pay for equal work and an expansion of the fleet from 2,500 buses to at least 10,000.

Workers were told salaries would increase by 30 percent initially and then 5 percent each year. The union said the government had "given its word" that the bus fleet would soon be increased by 900, but had stalled on the main issue of permanent jobs.

The isolated workers said they will remain on strike until their demand for permanency is met. The union has made no attempt to organise other state government contract and outsourced workers in a united struggle with the bus workers in pushing a demand for permanent secure jobs.

India: Odisha childcare workers protest again, demand pay increase

and recognition as government employees

Thousands of Anganwadi (childcare) workers demonstrated in Bhubaneswar, Odisha state on Monday December 13, over longstanding demands for increased wages and recognition as government employees. It followed a mass demonstration organised by the All Odisha Anganwadi Ladies Workers' Association in Bhubaneswar a week earlier over the same issues.

The association said the government had not fulfilled 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.

The workers say they will proceed with protests until their demands are addressed and will demonstrate during the upcoming budget session of the State Assembly.

Strike at Punjab government veterinary hospitals enters third week

Veterinary care workers from the Guru Angad Dev Veterinary and Animal Sciences University (GADVASU) hospitals in Ludhiana, Punjab state began an indefinite strike on December 1, demanding a pay increase. A representative of the Gadvasu Teachers' Association said staff are dealing only with emergency cases.

Workers want implementation of the revised University Grants Commission (UGC) pay scale as per the Seventh Pay Commission and reversal of the government's decision to delink teachers' pay grades from the UGC pay scale.

Himachal Pradesh government workers demand abolition of National Pension Scheme

Hundreds of government employees demonstrated in Dharamsala, Himachal Pradesh, on December 11 demanding the government scrap the National Pension Scheme (NPS) and reinstate the old scheme. About 90,000 government employees in Himachal are covered by the NPS.

The NPS was introduced by the central government in 2004 as an austerity measure, replacing a fully government-funded system which offered a guaranteed pension based on workers' last-drawn pay.

Under the NPS, workers are forced to pay 10 percent of their salary into the scheme, fattening the profits of major investors, and tying pensions to the fluctuations of the market. Pensioners receive far less than under the old defined benefits scheme.

Municipal workers in New Delhi on strike over unpaid wages and pensions

Thousands of New Delhi municipal workers began an indefinite strike on Monday over three months of unpaid salaries and pensions. The striking workers included teachers, engineers, sanitation workers, horticulture workers, clerical staff, nurses, paramedics and Class IV employees. Workers also staged a protest outside the Delhi Municipal Corporation headquarters.

Sri Lankan health workers walk out to demand allowances

Health workers, including nurses and paramedics, held a protest march in Badulla, Uva province and demonstrated in front of the Badulla General hospital on Dec 15 over longstanding demands. Workers are seeking payment of allowances for substitute employees who had completed 180 days service, special COVID-19 risk allowances for all health workers, higher overtime payments and an increase of their uniform allowance to 15,000 rupees (\$US 74).

The protest was part of an ongoing series of strikes begun by health workers in November. The United Health Workers Union said it planned to hold strikes and protests in all provinces, eventually leading to an indefinite strike until workers' demands are met.

The government claims payment of additional allowances is not possible due to the current economic crisis.

Sri Lankan postal workers strike for pay increase and other demands

Postal workers, including postmasters, began a two-day strike on Monday, demanding a salary increase of 10,000 rupees (\$US50), immediate recruitment to fill vacant positions and provision of motorcycles to staff performing field work, along with other claims.

Postal authorities warned the government that if the demands are not resolved workers would go on indefinite strike.

Sri Lankan railway workers strike over unsafe railway infrastructure

Railway guards and drivers struck for several hours beginning at noon on Wednesday. They are calling for urgent maintenance to railway infrastructure, the condition of which they say presents safety concerns for workers and passengers.

The workers are also demanding action on long-pending promotions and the reinstatement of workers dismissed when they could not work due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

All trains across the country stopped running until the evening when the union called off the strike following discussions with railway authorities.

Industrial action by New South Wales commuter rail workers enters fourth month

Members of the Rail Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) and the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) employed at Sydney Trains and New South Wales (NSW) Trains implemented work bans and a limited strike on Tuesday, as part of ongoing industrial action over bargaining for a new enterprise agreement.

RTBU members refused to operate "privately built" rolling stock, reducing the capacity of Sydney's rail network by around 70 percent. More than 100 members of the AMWU stopped work for four hours at 4 a.m. Tuesday, affecting TrainLink Intercity services. The combined action came after a 24-hour partial strike by RTBU members on December 7 which followed several limited strikes and work bans over the past three months.

The RTBU is seeking 3.5 percent annual pay increases, slightly above the current official CPI of 3 percent, but far short of what is needed to keep up with the rapidly increasing cost of living. Transport for NSW is offering a "2.5 percent" annual pay rise, which includes a 0.5 percent superannuation bump, meaning the actual increase in pay would be just 2.04 percent.

Other key demands are over job security, particularly the use of casual and labour-hire workers and contractors, as well as the ever-present threat of privatisation. Following the sell-off of the state's bus and ferry networks, spearheaded by the Labor Party and enforced by the unions, rail is the last mode of public transport that (mostly) remains in public hands.

Print workers locked out in Western Australia

More than 100 print production workers at West Australian Newspapers (WAN) in Perth, Western Australia, were locked out indefinitely on December 10 after holding a 4-hour work stoppage as part of a two-year dispute over a new enterprise agreement.

According to the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union, which covers some of the 118 workers, management is trying to strip back redundancy entitlements and other conditions, and is refusing to re-enter negotiations. This is the first industrial action at the printing facility for 17 years.

South Australian hospital health workers continue struggle against unsafe conditions

About 200 essential health workers walked off the job at two major public hospitals in Adelaide, South Australia (SA) on Tuesday over serious understaffing and the threat of privatisation. The action, by cleaners, catering staff, sterilisation technicians and patient services assistants at the Royal Adelaide and Queen Elizabeth hospitals, followed a walkout by their colleagues at three Adelaide hospitals earlier this month over the same issues.

About 3,000 health workers are maintaining work bans at 46 hospitals and aged care facilities across the state. Workers implemented the bans in April in opposition to the SA Liberal government's threats to outsource health jobs and privatise facilities.

Workers say they have been exploited during the COVID-19 pandemic as a result of chronic underfunding and the lack of preparation of the public health system to deal with the coronavirus.

While the traumatised and exhausted workers are eager to mount major industrial action, the United Workers Union (UWU) has restricted action to low-level work bans and brief walkouts and protests designed as media

stunts. Meanwhile, the union has made tepid appeals to the Marshall government for additional staffing and health funding, and fostered illusions in the Labor Party opposition.

The government's mid-year budget review estimated that nearly 2,000 health jobs will be axed between 2022 and 2024, insisting they are COVID-19 related positions that will no longer be needed.

Western Australian alumina refinery workers' industrial action in third week

Eight ALTRAD contract rope access workers at Alcoa's alumina refinery in Kwinana, 20 kilometres south of Western Australia's capital Perth, are maintaining industrial action begun on November 29 in an enterprise agreement dispute. Workers are demanding parity of pay and conditions with workers from other contracting companies doing the same job.

Meanwhile, ten ALTRAD sheet metal workers at Alcoa will begin protected industrial action next week in their fight for better terms and conditions in the company's proposed enterprise agreement.

Lockout at Graphic Packaging International in Melbourne in fourth week

Around 120 workers at the Graphic Packaging International (GPI) manufacturing plant in Braeside, Melbourne have been locked out since taking limited industrial action on November 24. Workers were told they would not be allowed to return to work unless they agreed to end all industrial action.

GPI management has refused to enter negotiations with the Australian Manufacturing Workers' Union (AMWU) over the workers' first enterprise agreement (EA). According to the union, the workers are on low-paid award conditions, with some paid different rates to co-workers doing the same job.

The factory has a total production workforce of over 200. Management is maintaining operations during the lockout by increasing the workload of non-union permanent employees and employing contract labour.

The workers are currently paid just \$22.46 an hour and are seeking a \$0.95 per hour pay increase. GPI has refused to discuss the worker's log of claims for improved conditions and has offered only a \$0.45 per hour rise.

The meagre wage rise demanded by the AMWU would leave workers earning just \$23.41 an hour or \$890 per week, compared to the average weekly base wage in the manufacturing sector of \$1,600 per week.

GPI-Australia is part of the US-based GPI, which has annual revenue of over \$US1 billion. GPI-Australia generates annual sales of \$US153 million from its 544 employees across Australia.

Tasmanian aged care nurses to vote on strike action

Nurse at Tasmania's largest private aged care provider Southern Cross Care (SCC) are set to vote on taking protected industrial action that could include multiple work bans and strikes. The nurses are in a long running dispute with SCC over the company's plan to slash wages and conditions

under a new enterprise agreement (EA).

In negotiations with the Australian Nursing and Midwifery Association (ANMF), SCC demanded that nurses give up paid meal breaks, overtime restrictions, access to training, redeployment and redundancy entitlements, cuts to shift penalty rates, and accept "pay increases" averaging just 1.7 percent per annum, a substantial pay cut in real terms.

Administrative staff at Sydney Hospital walk out

Workers in Medical Records at Sydney Hospital walked off the job for two hours on Monday over short staffing and mounting workloads. Workers demanded an immediate increase of five staff, followed by a review of the staffing profile—something they claim has not been undertaken for more than ten years.

In an attempt to appease the workers, the Health Services Union (HSU) said it would make a formal complaint to SafeWork New South Wales (NSW) requesting an investigation. The HSU said it was aware that Medical Records is not the only area in NSW Health experiencing these issues; workloads have been increasing in many departments and staff are under pressure to take on extra duties.

Despite this acknowledgment, the HSU has taken no steps to mobilise workers in a coordinated campaign to put an end to long-term short staffing and the chronic underfunding of health by successive Labor and Liberal-National governments.



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