

# Workers Struggles: Asia and Australia

29 April 2022

## Asia

Taiwan Railway Administration (TRA) plans to suspend commuter rail services island-wide on May 1 in response to an overtime ban by Taiwan Railway Labour Union (TRLU) members. While about 1,200 drivers had been scheduled to work overtime on May 1 in response to increased demand for the three-day holiday, virtually none are expected to report for their shifts.

The union claims that some 13,000 of TRA's 16,000 employees will participate in the industrial action over new legislation that seeks to transform the TRA into a public corporation. The TRLU accused the government of drafting a statute establishing the Taiwan Railway Corporation (TRC) before reaching an agreement with the unions. Other unions involved in the dispute are the National Train Drivers' Union and the Taiwan Railway Union (TRU).

The TRLU claimed the draft statute is flawed, fails to address safety issues and does not guarantee that the civil servants salary adjustment procedures would continue after the corporation is established. Workers also fear that they will be forced to vacate TRA dormitories when the corporation is set up and not receive any improvement in salary or benefits.

A TRLU spokesman said the unions disagree on 12 articles in the statute and that workers do not believe the ministry's promises of better salaries and benefits. Once the TRC is established, each employee will be given five years to consider whether to remain a civil servant or become a company employee.

Around 1,700 fishermen and their families from a dozen local government areas in Cagayan province in the Philippines marched in Aparri on April 22 in protest over sand-mining operations in the Cagayan River, the longest river in the Philippines. Fishermen from five neighbouring towns participated in the rally.

Protesters alleged that dredging activity had decimated fish and shrimp populations and slashed the income of 11,000 fishermen. A spokesperson said the catch has dropped by at least 90 percent since dredging began in 2021.

A Cagayan government official claimed the dredging was necessary to open the river for navigation but did not offer any compensation for loss of income. The fishermen alleged the dredging was a commercial project by a private company aimed at extracting black sand from the riverbed.

Over 200 contract workers from the Chhattisgarh State Power Distribution Company marched to the chief minister's residence in Raipur on April 22 intending to stage a sit-in protest but were pushed back by police.

The workers, who began their strike over a month ago over several demands, slept on the road overnight as a form of protest. The next day they were beaten by police and several were detained when they tried to picket government offices. They were calling for salary

increases, accident insurance and job permanency.

Terminated contract health workers from the National Health Mission (NHM) staged a sit-down protest in Jammu on Wednesday demanding permanent positions. They said that their contracts ended on April 7 and no decision was taken by the authorities to extend it. The workers accused the government of exercising a "use and throw" policy. They have threatened to intensify their protests if the government does not soon revoke their termination orders.

Contract bus workers from the Punjab Roadways' Patti depot in Ludhiana demonstrated on Tuesday to protest the transfer of union leaders to locations far from their homes. PUNBUS/PRTC Contract Workers Union members claimed the Punjab transport minister had ordered the transfers because the union leaders had raised demands on behalf of the depot workers.

Workers were demanding permanent jobs for contract workers, purchase of 10,000 new buses and action against what they described as a "transport mafia" in the state.

Primary teachers protested over the non-payment of salaries outside the District Education Office in Nawanshahr on April 22. Their union, Sanjha Adhyapak Morcha, said that all the Block Primary Education Officer (BPEO) posts in the district were vacant due to non-payment of salaries.

Due to budget restrictions, their salaries for December, January and February were not released until the last week of March. The teachers say that the functioning of primary schools is being affected in the absence of the BPEOs and repeated delay in paying salaries.

Tamil Nadu Water and Drainage Board Employees Union members demonstrated in Madurai on April 27 against pay cuts and delayed wages. The protest was coordinated by the Centre for Indian Trade Unions.

They complained that the pay of about 3,000 daily wage workers had been reduced from 786 rupees (\$US10.26) to between 250 to 280 rupees a day, which is the minimum wage. They condemned the board for not implementing the time-scale pay order passed by the Supreme Court and said pay arrears were pending, along with payment of the dearness allowance to pensioners and families. Workers also called for the reinstatement of sacked lab workers.

Hundreds of terminated workers and family members from the Barapukuria Coal Mine at Dinajpur in northern Bangladesh demonstrated at the mine entrance on Wednesday to demand reinstatement and payment of eight months' outstanding wages.

Their action followed a similar demonstration on Sunday that presented a memorandum of demands to a mine authority representative. About 700 workers were terminated two years ago when the COVID-19 pandemic hit the country but not called back for work.

A Barapukuria Miners' and Workers' Union spokesman said that if their demands were not met by midday on April 27 noon, they and their families would protest at the mine's entrance and "celebrate a

joyless” Eid-ul-Fitr.

Hundreds of Bangladeshi apparel workers in industrial zones such as Mirpur, Ashulia and Uttara in Dhaka, demonstrated on Monday over demands that included payment of several months of outstanding wages and the Ramadan festival allowance.

Police intervened against several hundred protesting workers from Intraco Design and Intraco Fashion at Uttara in Dhaka after their demonstration spilled onto the airport road. At least ten workers were injured when police open fire with tear gas and rubber bullets.

On April 23, Cotton Textile and Apparels workers gathered at Pallabi in Mirpur, blocking the road in protest against the company’s previous promise pay them four months’ outstanding wages and a festival allowance by April 20.

According to the government’s industrial police, festival allowances remain unpaid in 78 percent of over 9,000 industrial units in Ashulia, Gazipur, Chattogram, Narayanganj, Mymensingh, Khulna and Sylhet, indicating that more protests are imminent.

## Australia

About 12,000 workers from 160 aged care facilities in Queensland, Western Australia and South Australia will walk off the job on May 10 over concerns about low pay and chronic understaffing. United Workers Union (UWU) members will strike in each state around 11.30 a.m., ahead of planned rallies about 1 p.m. in Brisbane, Adelaide and Perth.

Workers at eight major aged care providers, including Uniting Care’s Blue Care, Southern Cross Care and Aegis, with 12,700 residents, overwhelmingly voted to take industrial action. They are demanding above minimum award wages, adequate staffing levels, a registered nurse at each facility 24/7, and implementation of recommendations of the federal government’s royal commission into aged care.

Aged care workers have complained of lack of COVID-19 vaccinations and boosters, inadequate supply of RAT kits and PPE (personal protective equipment). They said they are frustrated that they are unable to give the level of care their residents need.

About 100 members of the Australian Services Union (ASU) from the Moreland City Council, an inner-north Melbourne suburb, began a series of limited strike action on April 22. They are in dispute over the council’s proposed enterprise agreement. Industrial action will include work stoppages ranging from 4, 8 and 24 hours.

The ASU said council management decided to end negotiations in early April with the bargaining group, which included the ASU and the Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation (ANMF) with 40 unresolved claims on the table. The ASU says the council’s pay offer was a real pay cut and there was no improvement on safety and conditions.

More than 100 owner drivers for the car-carrying business Autocare stopped work on Tuesday and Wednesday to attend meetings to demand higher remuneration rates. They are demanding that Autocare increase its current rate from \$1.70 to \$1.94 per kilometre. The Transport Workers Union (TWU) says the rate has not changed in ten years and that the company wants to reduce it to \$1.65 per kilometre.

The drivers transport vehicles from Port Melbourne in Victoria and Port Brisbane in Queensland to dealerships in their respective states.

They are also demanding an increase in the fuel levy, saying it currently does not cover highly inflated fuel costs. They want a fixed rate in line with the interstate drivers of the company who currently receive \$1.20 per litre.

Australian Paramedics Association (APA) and the Ambulance Division of the Health Services Union (ADHSU) members are maintaining work bans imposed at the end of March for improved pay and conditions to make up for past wage freezes and inadequate staffing levels.

Both unions are taking similar but uncoordinated and limited industrial action. This includes not completing certain paperwork, restricting staff movements to fill vacant shifts and no patient transfers between hospitals. Paramedics from both unions are using chalk to put signs on ambulances saying, “Over worked, under-valued, under paid” and “Lowest paid ambos in Australia.”

The NSW Liberal government imposed a wage freeze on all state public sector employees in October 2020, claiming it was necessary because of COVID-19 “disruption” to the economy. Pay increases due in 2020–21 were limited to just 0.3 percent. The government has imposed a wage increase cap of 2.5 percent on all state public sector workers.

The ADHSU claims that a 5.5 percent wage increase is needed to make up for previous pay cuts and to bring NSW paramedics’ pay into line with colleagues in other states.

The APA is pushing for a 10 percent pay rise, 1,500 additional paramedics and an expansion of the specialist paramedic program to turn around the deteriorating conditions in the ambulance service. In February, APA members took 24 hours industrial action against worsening working conditions, including staff doing 16-hour shifts without breaks.

Catholic school teachers across NSW are voting on whether to take industrial action in their fight for a new enterprise agreement. The Independent Education Union of Australia (IEUA) has almost 20,000 members in 600 Catholic schools throughout NSW and the Australian Capital Territory.

Possible industrial action includes unlimited work stoppages from parts of an hour, a full hour or half day duration. The ballot closes on May 12.

The IEUA has put forward five key demands. These are a pay increase to bring teachers in line with other professionals, pay parity for support staff with their counterparts in government schools, cutting paperwork, reduction of face-to-face teaching by two hours a week and an end to staff shortages.

The IEUA claimed that understaffing and low wages were driving teachers into other professions. The union complained that since negotiations for a new enterprise agreement began in November 2021 the employer has only agreed to meet three times.



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