

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific

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

Asia

University and college teachers from across Himachal Pradesh, India's northernmost state, protested in Palampur on May 21 to demand implementation of the Seventh Pay Commission recommendations in universities and colleges.

More than 3,000 teachers have established a joint action committee to push for their demands. They have submitted numerous memorandums to the state governor and the chief minister but to no avail.

Protesters said that the government had already announced new pay scales for the employees of various departments to be paid from February 2022. University and college teachers, however, were not being paid the new scales, four years after the notification was originally issued by the Ministry of Human Resource Development and the University Grants Commission.

Puducherry Electricity Department workers went on strike on May 23 in protest against the privatisation of the Electricity Distribution Company. Strikers demonstrated outside the Electricity Department headquarters, denouncing the government.

Workers previously walked out when the government first announced that it was privatising the department but called it off temporarily following an assurance from the Puducherry chief minister that there would be no decision until there were discussions with department staff, the public and political parties. He claimed that no one would be impacted.

After the cabinet approved privatisation of the Electricity Distribution Company, the unions established a Joint Action Committee and decided to resume their industrial action.

More than 100 municipal employees held a sit-down protest outside the District Collector's office in Anantapur on May 23 to demand the immediate payment of three months' outstanding salaries.

The protest was organised by Municipal Employees and Workers' Union members. They also demonstrated outside the electricity department office, chanting slogans against the Andhra Pradesh state government and the municipal corporation.

Andhra Pradesh farm labourers protested outside the collector's office in Nandyal on May 23. Their major demand was for payment of outstanding Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MNREGS) wages. They chanted slogans against the Modi government, who is in line with big business demands and trying to undermine and shut the scheme.

The annual national budget allocation for MNREGS has been cut from 980 billion rupees in 2021 to just 730 billion rupees this year.

Western Railways Carriage Repair Workshop employees at Lower Parel in Mumbai protested on May 21 over inadequate canteen facilities and the use of radio-frequency identification (RFID) tags to gain entry to the workshop. Workers said that the canteen was too small and could not accommodate all employees at once.

The workshop employs around 3,000 workers but the canteen could

only accommodate between 150 and 200 of them at a time. This meant employees had to sit on the floor of the workshop, or go out of the facility during lunch and tea breaks. If they left the facility they had to tap in and tap out every time with their radio-frequency identification tags, which meant close monitoring and was restricting their movements. After the mass protests, Western Railways management decided to temporarily suspend the RFID attendance system.

Young nursing job aspirants, the majority of them women, were attacked by police during protests outside the health department headquarters in Salt Lake City, Kolkata on May 24. Anomalies in West Bengal's nursing recruitment processes have left 4,000 aspirants jobless. Police, including members of the Rapid Action Force, violently attacked the young protesters.

Hundreds of Nuwara Eliya district government general hospital workers, including doctors, nurses, development officers and other hospital staff, protested outside the hospital on Monday to demand improved health services and against worsening shortages of medicines and medical care.

Demonstrators carried banners and chanted slogans such as, "Do not abolish health facilities," "Save the sick," "Hands off health care," and "Eliminate [Rajapakse] family rule."

On Wednesday, Polonnaruwa government district hospital workers, including supplementary and auxiliary employees, as well as Anuradhapura hospital workers, demonstrated over worsening public health services. Anuradhapura district hospital workers also protested over the non-payment of overtime and other allowances.

Last week health workers at the Kandy and Badulla general hospitals held protests over the same issues.

Postal worker members of the Parcel Delivery Workers Union, which is affiliated with the KCTU, are currently negotiating with Korea Post on a new contract. Workers have rejected the new wage-cutting contract offer, which is being described as a "slave contract" because it makes it easier for Korea Post to discipline and fire workers. The union will hold a strike vote on June 2 and 3.

If workers decide to strike, 2,700 union members out of a total 3,800 postal workers could walk off the job in mid-June. The government-owned Korea Post has refused to negotiate further, stating that the contract was "not a matter for discussion."

Logistics workers have regularly taken industrial action over the past 12 months in protest against worsening conditions, including low pay and long work hours. Nearly two dozen workers in the package delivery sector have died from overwork since the COVID-19 pandemic began.

Cargo Truckers Solidarity (CTS) members plan to strike on June 7 in protest against skyrocketing diesel prices. CTS is affiliated with the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions. "Having to pay several million won more for fuel costs [\$US1=1,263 won], cargo truckers are facing a crisis," a union official told a May 23 press conference.

Drivers want a rise in the minimum freight fare to offset the higher fuel costs and are also demanding other assistance measures to protect their livelihoods. This includes an extension of the Safe Trucking Freight Rates

System, which guarantees a legal minimum freight rate. It is also meant to prevent unsafe driving so drivers do not feel pressured to take on more work and deliver goods at faster speeds to make ends meet. The system is scheduled to expire at the end of this year.

Station workers at KORAIL Networks, a subsidiary of the Korea Railroad Corporation (KORAIL), have struck for better wages from May 27 to May 29. The workers are members of the Korean Public Service and Transport Workers' Union and are in charge of ticketing at major train stations and handling customer support centres. They are demanding higher pay rises beyond the paltry 2.4 percent wage increase guideline for workers in public industries. Over 1,070 union members from the 1,800 workers employed in this sector are taking part in the strike.

In addition to station and customer service workers, irregular workers with the National Health Insurance Service and the Korea Racing Authority, which oversees horse racing, are also planning to participate. They are demanding a resolution of the problems facing irregular workers, including low wages and a lack of job protections. In total, approximately 3,000 workers are involved in the strike.

Two Taiwan railway unions have called off a planned strike for June 3, the date of the Dragon Boat Festival. The Taiwan Railway Labor Union (TRLU) and the National Train Drivers' Union (NTDU) met and decided on May 25 to call off the planned strike without any of the workers' demands being met. The decision was made to protect the Taiwan Railways Administration (TRA), which belongs to the government's ministry of transportation and communication.

TRLU Chairman Chen Shih-chieh stated, "We have not yet reached a consensus on most of the opinions discussed during the meeting, but the decision not to go on strike during the Dragon Boat Festival is final."

The government is planning to corporatise TRA, turning it into a state-owned corporation, despite the resistance of railway workers who fear a loss in benefits and other attacks on their working conditions. Workers are also angry over low wages and safety. The unions canceled the upcoming strike with only empty promises from the government to resolve these issues.

Taipei is exploiting the tragic train derailment of the Taroko Express in April 2021, which killed 49 people, to justify the corporatisation of the TRA. The government claims this measure will improve safety, despite the fact that the accident occurred as a result of unsafe working conditions at a construction site located near the train tracks. The corporatisation of the TRA will not address safety in the railway or construction industries.

Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific

Seventeen thousand New South Wales (NSW) Catholic school educators and support staff walked out for 24 hours on May 27 over wages and conditions.

Catholic education workers from 540 schools voted overwhelmingly to strike, following failed negotiations between the Independent Education Union of Australia (IEU) officials and the Catholic Dioceses of NSW.

Teachers and support staff are opposing worsening and unsustainable workloads, chronic staff shortages, below inflation wage increases, and the consequences of the Australian governments' "live with COVID" policies. The strike follows two walkouts in the last six months by NSW public school teachers over the same issues. The NSW government has limited public sector wage rises to just 2.5 percent per annum during the last decade.

Over the last two years, the NSW's Catholic Dioceses has limited pay increases to its education workers to just 2.04 percent per annum, well below inflation which is currently running at 5.1 percent per annum.

On Tuesday, the Municipal and Utilities Union (MUWU) called off a planned three-day walkout by Moreland Council library and sanitation workers. The strike, which was to begin the following day, was for better wages and conditions in a new enterprise agreement (EA).

Moreland council workers previously went on strike for 24 hours on

April 4, following a breakdown in EA negotiations with management and the unions. Workers rejected a management offer of a 1.5 percent pay rise this year and a 2 percent pay rise next year.

The council's 364-strong workforce is covered by the various unions: the Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation (ANMF), the Municipal and Utilities Union (MUWU) and the Australian Services Union (ASU).

This week's strike was called off after the MUWU, in separate negotiations with the council, made a deal. The union has released few details about the deal but according to media reports, it has accepted a 3 percent wage rise in the first year and a potential 10 percent increase in the next three years. With inflation running at 5.1 percent, the new deal is a wage cut. No public statement has been released by the other unions involved.

Hundreds of care workers took to the streets across New Zealand on Monday protesting low pay. Rallies were held in Whangarei, Auckland, Hamilton, New Plymouth, Hastings, Wellington, Christchurch, Dunedin and Invercargill.

The Labour-Green government has offered a 3 percent pay rise, less than half the 6.9 percent inflation rate. Workers are urgently demanding a pay increase before legislation that sets their pay and qualification requirements expires next month.

The workers are employed in health care support, rest homes and residential disability care. They work for private companies, including the highly profitable retirement home sector, but their wages are subsidised by the state. The government has indicated they are unlikely to fund for more than 70 cents an hour for 18 months.

Deb Burns, a carer in Upper Hutt, said her typical working day starts at 8 a.m. and finishes at 7 p.m., with a three-hour gap in between. She earns \$26.61 per hour and a car allowance that does not cover the long distances she has to travel.

Health Minister Andrew Little said he was working with officials, unions and employers to secure a "modest" pay rise but wants to advance a "pay equity" claim with the unions. The previous National Party government barred them from the right to it. That legislation, affecting 65,000 workers, expires on June 30.

A strike by 10,000 allied health workers in New Zealand has been called off after a new pay offer from the District Health Boards (DHBs). The Public Service Association (PSA) cancelled the strike and is recommending workers accept the offer. Members will have two weeks to vote, but no details have been publicly released.

The workers include technicians, dental assistants, counsellors, physiotherapists, psychologists and medical laboratory scientists. Many earn little more than the legal minimum wage of \$21.20 an hour. Their pay has effectively been frozen since the employment contract expired 18 months ago.

The workers initially voted to strike in March, but the Employment Court banned it at the last minute. The PSA re-entered negotiations facilitated by the Employment Relations Authority (ERA). On May 16, the workers struck for 24 hours as part of a two-week industrial action, which included a limited work-to-rule.

The DHBs presented an offer just days before that strike. The PSA did not take this to members, saying it did not reflect recommendations made by the ERA and would not address cost of living pressures. The ballot for another 24-hour strike on July 1 went to members last week, gaining overwhelmingly support before the new deal was struck.

Workers at Zeagold, New Zealand's largest egg producer, held a two-day strike this week, demanding improved wages. About 30 workers protested in the Auckland suburb of Takanini on Tuesday, and the following day about 35 protested outside the company's Dunedin site. Workers also voted for a ban on overtime until the end of May.

A FIRST Union official told the media that many of the workers are on

the minimum wage. Meanwhile, the company was continuing to expand, hiring more workers on a temporary basis, and placing increasing pressure on its workforce.

The E tu union, which is also involved in the wage negotiations, says it wants a 10 percent pay increase. With annual inflation currently at 6.9 percent, this would equate to a real pay increase of just over 3 percent. Bargaining began in early February. An E tu spokesperson said the strike was “not something we wanted to do.”

Zeagold’s parent company is Mainland Poultry Ltd, which has 1.3 million hens. The company is majority owned by private equity firm Navis Capital, which has invested over \$4 billion in buying out companies across the Asia-Pacific region in the last 20 years.

Demonstrations have erupted over the rising cost of living in the French Pacific territory of New Caledonia. Broad layers of the population have been involved including workers, farmers and truckers. Hundreds of people attended the largest demonstration in Noumea on May 18. Protesters also gathered in Bourail and Noumea’s Port Moselle area on May 23.

While the territory’s official inflation rate is relatively low at 1.2 percent, the cost of living is already extremely high. Food alone counts for 20 percent of all imports and escalating fuel prices are causing additional hardships.

Efforts are being made to confine the movement to official channels. The so-called Citizens Association of New Caledonia, which was formed last year and describes itself as “apolitical,” downscaled protests last week in favour of a “symbolic presence” in the capital while claiming it will continue to “pressure” the government to act. Trade unions also met government leaders and called for a rise in the minimum wage and a review of salary structures.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

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