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.*

India: West Bengal tea garden workers strike against low wages

More than 10,000 tea garden workers and administrative staff in the north of West Bengal held a 72-hour strike on May 31 to demand an immediate salary increase. The striking workers called for the state government and tea planters to “fix” the minimum salary or revive the old system of annual pay revisions.

A tea worker in West Bengal earns 202 rupees ($US2.6) a day while a sub-staff worker earns 7,000 to 9,000 rupees per month and a staff worker earns 13,000 to 24,000 rupees per month. The state labour department called a tripartite meeting with the tea planters' associations and trade unions for June 2.

In a separate dispute, on May 31 more than 2,000 workers from the Margherita Tea Estate in Dibrugarh, Tinsukia district, Assam protested for two hours outside the estate’s general manager’s office over various issues including low wages. The protest was organised by the Assam Tea Tribes Students’ Association and the Assam Tea Tribes Women’s’ Association.

Ford auto workers in Tamil Nadu continue protests over plant closure

Ford auto plant workers in Maraimalai Nagar near Chennai protested inside and outside the factory on May 31 to demand termination payments be made prior to the closure of the plant. A huge contingent of police were rushed to the factory to protect infrastructure and intimidate the protesting workers.

Ford has decided to wind up its operations in India. The Maraimalai Nagar workers have been holding protests and factory occupations since February opposing the closure. Ford’s auto plant in Gujarat state was taken over by Tata Motors with all workers retaining their jobs. Maraimalai Nagar workers had been demanding the same job security.

The factory employed 2,700 permanent workers and 600 contract workers. The Chennai Ford Employees Union has restricted all industrial action to limited protests, mainly confining workers to toothless appeals to the Tamil Nadu government and Ford.

Tamil Nadu sanitation workers in Madurai on indefinite strike

Sanitation workers in Madurai, Tamil Nadu began an indefinite strike on May 30 over 28 demands. These include a salary increase and distribution of the COVID-19 relief fund.

The strike is supported by the Madurai Corporation Employees Association (CITU), the Tamil Nadu Sanitary Employees Progressive Association, and the Sanitary Workers Development Union.

Terminated non-teaching staff of Karnataka arts university demand wages and jobs

Terminated temporary non-teaching staff from the Dr. Gangubai Hangal University of Music and Performing Arts in Mysuru, Karnataka protested on May 30 to demand pending salaries and reinstatement. The university sacked the 21 temporary workers in November last year claiming they had been employed by the University Syndicate ten years ago without following government regulations. The workers have been demonstrating outside the university since February. They began a hunger strike in late April.

Tamil Nadu government workers protest over multiple demands

Tamil Nadu state government workers demonstrated outside the Madurai Collectorate on May 28 as part of a national campaign over a large charter of demands. The demonstration was called by the Madurai District Tamil Nadu Government Employees’ Union along with various workers’ forums.

They want the scrapping of various government imposed regressive schemes, such as the New Pension Scheme, New Education Policy and the National Monetisation Pipeline policy as well as dissolution of the Pension Fund Regulatory and Development Authority.

Other demands are payment of a 3 percent increase in Dearness Allowance and revoking of the suspended surrender and encashment of earned leave and provident fund. Protesters called for the government to stop privatising the public sector, including the railways, life insurance, banking, telecommunications and the airline industry.

General Insurance workers demonstrate in New Delhi

General Insurance workers staged lunch-hour demonstrations across the country at various head offices, regional offices and other centres on May

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26 demanding immediate payment of wage increases. They also want reinstatement of the 1995 pension scheme by capping the new National Pension System, provision of the Unifor Family Pension of 30 per cent, pension revision and repeal of amendments to the General Insurance Business Nationalisation ACT. Protesters condemned management and the government for delaying their wage settlement.

Haryana medical college nurses demand unpaid allowances

Kalpana Chawla Government Medical College nurses in Karnal, Haryana demonstrated on the college hospital premises on May 25 for allowances outstanding since 2014. They complained of being overburdened by staff shortages and demanded the immediate payment of allowances and for staff numbers to be increased.

Tamil Nadu Hatsun Arokya Milk Dairy workers on strike

Thousands of Hatsun Arokya Milk Dairy workers have been on strike since September 25 last year to demand payment of the minimum wage in line with government norms and a provident fund scheme for contract workers.

Hatsun Arokya Milk Dairy is owned by Hatsun Agro Products, which employs 10,000 permanent workers and 22,000 on temporary contract in Tamil Nadu. Workers complained about forced resignations and transfers, underpayment, overwork and inhuman treatment by superiors. They claimed that the company has never paid retirement benefits to anyone in its 50-year history and as soon as a worker has five years of service they are fired to avoid being made permanent.

Workers are also demanding recognition of their union. The strike is coordinated by the CITU.

Bangladeshi textile workers demand overdue wages

About 100 workers from the Regent Textile Mills demonstrated outside the company's headquarters in Kotwali in the port city of Chattogram on May 25. They were demanding nine months outstanding wages. Their factory was closed in March.

The protest followed a demonstration over the same issues during April in which they were brutally attacked by police leaving at least 16 workers injured.

A spokesperson for the workers blamed factory authorities for not releasing workers from their jobs so they could seek work with other companies. "We are demanding our salaries, not other benefits," he said.

Sri Lankan engineering corporation workers protest

Hundreds of Engineering Corporation Employees Union members protested outside the corporation's offices in central Colombo on Wednesday to demand timely payment of wages and resolution of other issues. Workers displayed placards and banners demanding job security and reversal of the corporation's proposals to halt construction work.

Pakistan riot police attack protesting teachers in Karachi

Riot police using water cannon and batons attacked peaceful demonstrations by government school teachers on Monday and Wednesday in Karachi. Over 250 protesters were arrested. The teachers had completed mandatory job requirements laid out by the government in 2013 and were demanding permanent jobs.

Teachers claimed the government had announced new vacancies despite their prolonged wait to receive appointments. According to the chief minister, however, nearly 7,000 schools in the province are closed due to teacher shortages. Cash strapped provincial governments in Pakistan are slashing jobs, including in education, as a solution to Pakistan's budget crisis.

Emergency housing workers in Melbourne hold second strike

Over 100 workers from Launch Housing, Melbourne's largest emergency accommodation provider, struck for 24 hours on Monday and protested outside the offices of Victoria's Department of Families Fairness and Housing (DFFH). DFFH is Launch Housing's major funder. Australian Services Union (ASU) members are in dispute over Launch Housing's proposed enterprise agreement.

The latest action followed a strike in October and implementation of indefinite work bans in February. The workers have not had a pay increase since their work agreement expired in June 2020. The workers voted almost unanimously in September 2021 to take strike action after almost a year of failed negotiations between the union and the company.

The largely female workforce is opposing Launch's classification system, its wage differentials between its multiple sites, and sleepover rates. They want salary increases in line with inflation.

Launch Housing employs 400 workers who provide employment services and crisis housing for the nightly 25,000 homeless people at 14 locations across Melbourne.

Newcastle bus drivers strike for better pay and conditions

Drivers employed by Keolis Downer, commuter bus services contractor, in Newcastle, New South Wales walked off the job for four hours at 10 a.m. on Friday after unanimously rejecting the company's proposed enterprise agreement.

A Rail Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) spokesperson said Keolis Downer had refused to consider increasing drivers' wages, telling them that they could only increase their pay if they worked longer hours. RTBU claimed the company demanded drivers work Sundays and volunteer for extra shifts before it would consider increasing its pay offer.

Newcastle's bus services were privatised in 2017. According to the union, the NSW government still controls wages of members employed by contracted operators. RTBU is avoiding increased industrial action promoting illusionary proposals that a wage increase can be gained by appealing to the state Liberal government.

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Aged care workers in three Australian states strike again over unsafe staffing levels and low wages

Thousands of members of the United Workers Union (UWU) from seven major aged care providers in Queensland, Western Australia and South Australia walked off the job on May 27 over concerns about low pay and chronic understaffing. The providers affected employ about 11,000 aged care workers in 149 aged care facilities, caring for more than 11,500 residents. Care providers affected included BlueCare (Queensland) Southern Cross Care (South Australia) and Aegis (Western Australia) among others.

The action followed a similar strike on May 10 that affected 160 facilities across the three states. UWU members from BlueCare in Queensland walked out on Monday and held a protest at the provider's office in Brisbane to push their demands.

Workers 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). The exhausted and traumatised workers said they are being pushed to breaking point by understaffing, impossible workloads and the emotional toll of not having enough time or support to provide the quality of care that residents require.

The UWU has kept industrial action isolated to the three states and opposes any attempt to extend the struggle to include aged care workers from other states and territories who face the same impossible working conditions.

Golden Circle pineapple processing workers in Queensland strike

Over 130 members of the United Workers Union (UWU) at the Golden Circle pineapple canning factory in Northgate, Brisbane walked out at 10 a.m. on Wednesday and demonstrated in front of the factory. They are demanding an improved pay offer in the company's proposed enterprise agreement (EA). The union claimed the pay offer was a real pay cut of more than 3 percent each year.

The company had offered an increase between 2 and 2.5 percent in a four-year agreement, which is well below inflation in Brisbane and currently 6 percent and increasing. The food processing employees want fair breaks for workers on the gruelling production lines.

Golden Circle is a subsidiary of one of the world's largest food and beverage companies, the billion-dollar Kraft Heinz Company. Kraft Heinz grew their international sales by 3.1 percent to $US5.6 billion in 2021.

Shell offshore LNG production workers in Western Australia to strike

About 160 technicians and maintenance workers at Shell's Prelude floating LNG production platform in Western Australia have given notice that they will begin rolling stoppages and work bans from June 10. The workers are represented by the Electrical Trades Union (ETU) and the Offshore Alliance (OA) (consisting of the Maritime Union of Australia and the Australian Workers Union).

The workers are currently employed on individual contracts. The OA and ETU have been negotiating an enterprise agreement with Shell since December 2020. Shell initially rejected the unions' request to negotiate an agreement in June 2020.

The unions have said they want nothing less than Tier 1 rates and conditions to bring workers in line with industry standards. They want a ban on Shell outsourcing jobs to contractors on lower rates of pay than received by directly employed workers doing the same job. The new enterprise agreement will cover about 230 workers.

Schindler Lifts workers in Melbourne begin rolling stoppages

About 50 workers from the escalator and lift manufacturer Schindler Lifts, in Melbourne walked off the job on Friday to start weekly four-hour rolling stoppages. Members of the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union are in dispute with Schindler over its proposed enterprise agreement. The industrial action is an attempt to get the company back to the negotiating table to strike a deal.

New Zealand firefighters vote to strike, reject pay offer

New Zealand firefighters have rejected an offer to settle their collective agreement and voted to go on strike. The NZ Professional Firefighters Union (NZPFU) held nationwide meetings from early May, before conducting a secret ballot on industrial action.

NZPFU national secretary Wattie Watson said firefighters want the employer, Fire and Emergency NZ (FENZ), to address wages and working conditions, along with staffing ratios that have led to station closures. The union has called for an 18 percent pay rise over three years, which is lower than the current inflation rate of 6.9 percent.

Under the FENZ offer, more than two thirds of firefighters would receive 1.5 percent pay for two years, effectively a significant pay cut. Firefighters have not received any increase since July 2020.

Some have begun to speak out on station closures and staffing ratios, which have not changed since 1980. Auckland firefighter Terry Bird told Radio NZ every fire appliance needs at least four staff and if people are absent, shift workers like him can do 70 to 80 hours a week.

Dates for strike action have not yet been confirmed and the union has said it could take "several forms." Indicating that the union is attempting to avoid any action, Watson said stoppages would only proceed "if we can't get FENZ around the table to talk sensibly and constructively about some movement" on wages and conditions.

New Caledonia: Protests continue over high living costs

Demonstrations involving workers, farmers and truckers against high living costs are continuing in the French Pacific territory of New Caledonia. Following protests in the capital Noumea last month, blockades were established at two fuel depots at Numbo and Ducos in the Noumea area on May 30, preventing trucks from leaving.

The main organising group, the so-called Citizens Association of New Caledonia, is attempting to confine the movement behind the established business and political set-up. The organisation was formed last year and

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describes itself as “apolitical” and is only offering fruitless appeals to the powers-that-be.

The Citizens Association’s latest action was aimed at forcing a meeting with the fuel companies and government. Their banners called for taxing the economically dominant nickel sector, blaming foreign multinationals for triggering inflation.

Last week’s blockades were quickly lifted after the association’s leaders were told they could meet the heads of the fuel companies. The organisation had earlier failed in negotiations with the government to persuade it to lower fuel prices.

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