

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.

India Post workers strike against corporatisation

About 60 percent of India Post's 450,000-strong workforce walked out on Wednesday to protest the Modi government's plan to corporatise certain sections of the state-owned enterprise.

Apart from distributing mail, India Post also accepts deposits under the Post Office Small Savings Scheme, provides life insurance cover and acts as an agent for distribution of wages to workers involved in the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act.

National Federation of Postal Employees (NFPE) members are concerned that the government is planning to hive off some of these profitable functions to the private sector. Workers fear that the government plans to corporatise the small savings scheme through introduction of the Indian Postal Payment Bank (IPPB) Limited.

The corporatised IPPB was launched in 2018 with 650 branches and 3,250 access points. Earlier this year, the federal government proposed the merging of the postal service's banking and insurance functions with IPPB.

India Railway workers protest rail privatisation

Thousands of workers from the Dhanbad Railway Division held lunchtime demonstrations at the Dhanbad branch area on Tuesday against the Modi government's plan to corporatise and privatise the Indian Railway. An East Central Railway Karmchari Union spokesman said all 22,000 workers in the Dhanbad Railway Division participated in the demonstrations.

Childcare workers in Delhi protest again over sackings

Anganwadi (childcare) workers and helpers in Delhi are continuing to protest the sacking of nearly 1,000 fellow workers who participated in a 39-day strike that ended on March 14. In a July 16 meeting, they were assured that swift action will be taken by Delhi's lieutenant governor on the issue. On Monday, anganwadi workers demonstrated at the governor's residence demanding action on the promise. Many workers suffered injuries when police attempted to break up the demonstration.

Thousands of anganwadi workers across Delhi walked out on January 31 to demand an increase in their honorarium and fixed working hours. They ended the strike after the government imposed its anti-strike Essential Services Maintenance Act and began issuing termination notices against striking workers. Nearly 12,000 workers were issued show-cause notices by the Delhi government.

Anganwadi workers want all outstanding wages and allowances to be paid up to the month of April and the arrears of the terminated workers cleared without any conditions.

Punjab teachers demand payment of outstanding allowances

Democratic Teachers' Front members protested near the deputy commissioner's office in Sangrur on Monday to demand revocation of the 2015 salary notification. They later marched to the chief minister's office over this demand.

Teachers complained that under the February 15, 2015 salary notification the first three years of employment is paid as a lump sum without any allowances given.

Tamil Nadu government doctors protest extended working hours

Doctors from Primary Health Centres (PHC) in Erode, Tamil Nadu, demonstrated at the District Headquarters Hospital on Monday to protest the state government's order to increase working hours at the PHCs. Doctors at the Government Medical College Hospital in Ramanathapuram protested on the same day over the extended working hours.

The Tamil Nadu Government Doctors' Association members said the government order increases working hours for government doctors from 40 per week to 48 hours.

Bangladeshi tea garden workers hold two-day strike for wage rise

Hundreds of workers from 23 tea gardens in Sylhet, 240 kilometres from Dhaka, struck on Tuesday and Wednesday to demand that their daily wage be increased from the below poverty level of 120 taka (\$US1.51) to 300 taka. The strike was called by the Bangladesh Tea Workers Union, which has allowed tea garden owners to get away with paying starvation wages.

After a two-year pay freeze, tea garden owners offered to increase the

daily wage by only 14 taka. A worker from the Kalighat tea garden said her wage would increase to only 134 taka. “How can I survive? Everything is so expensive. I can’t even buy fish and meat when I go to the market,” she said.

There are about 360,000 tea garden workers and family members in Bangladesh and almost two-thirds of the workers are women and girls, according to a March 2021 UN report.

South Korean bank workers protest peak-wage system

Union members from the state-owned KB Kookmin Bank demonstrated outside the bank’s headquarters in Yeouido, Seoul’s main finance and investment banking district, on August 4. They want the bank to end its peak-wage system and compensate the pay cut of employees under the program.

Under the peak-wage system, salaries of older workers are lowered in exchange for delaying their retirement. If employees choose voluntary retirement at state-owned banks, they only receive 22.5 percent of what they would get when working for additional years under the peak-wage system.

The union complained that workers at private commercial banks who take voluntary redundancies are given “hefty” severance checks, compared to the state-owned banks where workers must sign onto the peak-wage system and remain at work for longer to get the full entitlement.

Qantas Group engineers to strike

About 900 aviation engineers at Qantas and its subsidiaries, Jetstar and Network Aviation will begin industrial action at the end of August, starting with one-minute work stoppages. The Australian Licensed Aircraft Engineers Association (ALAEA) and Qantas Group have failed to reach agreement for a new enterprise agreement after long-running negotiations.

Over 700 or more than 90 percent of those balloted voted in favour of action, which could include overtime bans and work stoppages up to 12 hours.

Qantas licensed aircraft maintenance engineers (LAMEs) want a one-off pay rise of 12 percent and their counterparts at Jetstar want a 15 percent pay increase over four years. Engineers at the Perth-based Network Aviation want 20 percent over four years in a new agreement.

Engineers earlier this year rejected Qantas Group’s offer of a 2 percent pay rise along with a \$5,000 bonus and rights to 1,000 Qantas shares (currently trading around \$2.25 each). A Qantas representative told the media that the ALAEA wage demands are significantly more than the wage increases already agreed to earlier in the year by thousands of other Qantas employees.

A spokesman from the ALAEU admitted that the one-minute strike action would not harm the airline or disrupt passengers, but claimed it is aimed at getting Qantas back to the negotiating table.

Brisbane Airport cleaners strike over wages, workload and safety

About 60 cleaners employed by Brisbane Airport subcontractor Securecorp walked off the job for two hours and protested outside the airport corporation’s head office on August 4. The action followed two work stoppages in July and a ban on wearing their uniform.

The United Workers Union (UWU) has been in negotiations with Securecorp for a new enterprise agreement since January. The workers want a wage increase to take them above the minimum wage, an airport allowance to account for the extra costs they incur working at the airport and an end to understaffing.

They also oppose cleaning toilets while people are using them. Women cleaners, in particular, oppose cleaning busy male toilets where many have been abused and fear for their safety. Workers said they will not give up until they win fair pay, job security, respect and dignity.

Western Australian health workers hold another stop-work protest over poor pay and conditions

Hundreds of health workers from the state-owned Fiona Stanley, Fremantle and Rockingham Hospitals in Perth, Western Australia’s capital, walked off the job on August 3 to oppose the state Labor government’s 2.75 percent cap on wage increases for public sector workers. The strike followed similar walkouts at five major Perth health facilities in July over the issue.

The stoppages by members of the United Workers Union (UWU) included ward clerks, cleaners and other health workers. They were supported by other public sector workers, including electricians, paramedics, firefighters and childcare workers.

Public sector wages are capped at 2.75 percent, or 2.5 per cent with a \$1,000 sign-on bonus. The current official inflation rate in Perth is 7.6 percent. A protest outside state parliament and involving all public sector workers is planned for August 17.

Nurses at two Queensland private hospitals walk out over pay and staffing

Nurses and midwives employed by Ramsey Health Care at the Cairns Private Hospital, in Far-North Queensland, walked off the job for an hour on August 5 in a dispute for a new enterprise agreement. They rallied in front of the hospital holding various placards including “Nurses need care too” and “Ratios save lives.”

Queensland Nurses and Midwives’ Union (QNMU) members at three Ramsay private facilities in Cairns want pay parity with public sector nurses and an agreement on nurse-to-patient ratios. Ramsay have rejected any negotiation on ratios.

In a similar dispute, members of the QNMU at the St Vincent’s Private Hospital in Brisbane and Northside walked out for one hour and demonstrated in front of their hospitals on August 3 and 4.

Tasmanian hospital nurses fight for higher pay and improved staffing

Up to 100 members of the Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation (ANMF) walked off the job for 15 minutes at the Mersey Community Hospital in northwest Tasmania on Wednesday. The strike was part of an

ongoing state-wide campaign by ANMF members at public hospitals across Tasmania protesting unsafe staffing levels, low pay and impossible workloads.

The campaign began in July when hospital health workers and paramedics were struggling to cope with the COVID-19 pandemic caused by the government's "Let it-Rip" policies.

On July 19, 300 ANMF members at the Royal Hobart Hospital and the Hobart Repatriation Hospital walked out for 15 minutes followed by a 15-minute walkout by 150 members at the Launceston General Hospital in northern Tasmania. Nurses are calling for relief from their traumatic daily working conditions.

The ANMF's publicity stunt strikes are designed to let off steam while dragging out the dispute and politically demoralising nurses.

The ANMF opposes united statewide or national action with other health workers, including doctors, paramedics and ancillary health workers who are experiencing the same exhaustive workload.

Pfizer factory workers in Western Australia strike for pay rise

Close to 100 workers from the global pharmaceutical manufacturer Pfizer walked out for 24 hours at its Bentley plant in Perth on Tuesday demanding an improved pay offer and redundancy package in Pfizer's proposed enterprise agreement.

Pfizer workers voted overwhelmingly in July to strike, after rejecting the company's below-inflation pay increase offer of 5 percent in the first year, 4 percent in the second year, followed by 3 percent in the three-year agreement.

The United Workers Union is demanding an 18 percent pay increase over the three-year agreement which is well below Perth's CPI rate of 7.6 percent. Workers are also opposed to changes in how redundancy packages are calculated, which, the union claims, would leave them worse off.

In 2020, Pfizer announced plans to end production at its Bentley plant by 2023. Since then, it has been shedding its 2020 workforce of 470 with little resistance from the union. Production is being transferred to its plant in Melbourne and across the world.

Northern Territory garbage truck drivers hold 24-hour strike

About 15 members of the Transport Workers Union (TWU) employed by waste management contractor Cleanaway held a 24-hour strike in the City of Palmerston, a satellite city of the Northern Territory's capital Darwin, on August 5. The truck drivers rejected Cleanaway's proposed enterprise agreement which they said was an assault on safe working conditions and fair wages.

Across the territory, Cleanaway is negotiating with workers over enterprise agreements that the TWU claimed would see workers' wages and conditions go backwards. The union claimed that Cleanaway is attempting to limit safe working conditions and fatigue management provisions.

New Zealand paper mill workers locked out

Some 145 workers at the Kawerau mill of toilet paper manufacturer Essity have been locked out indefinitely after calling for an inflation adjustment as part of employment agreement negotiations.

Three separate contracts are being negotiated. The company offered a 3 percent pay rise plus a cash "incentive" of \$1,500 per year over three years, which keeps workers going backwards. Swedish-owned Essity is one of the world's largest hygiene companies with brands including Purex, Sorbent, Libra and Handee.

The Pulp and Paper Union is begging management to return to talks. "All we really want right now is to get the company to the negotiating table, we don't mind if it's facilitated bargaining, and we're the third party in there helping, we want to conclude bargaining," a union spokesman declared.

Wellington ambulance officers consider strike over pay

Wellington ambulance officers are considering strike action after receiving an offer that equates to a pay cut of almost 6 percent when accounting for inflation. According to First Union, meetings with Wellington Free Ambulance (WFA) produced an offer of just 1.5 percent with inflation currently 7.3 percent.

WFA is the only ambulance service in New Zealand funded by charity fundraising, making it permanently underfunded and precarious. A union spokesman complained that WFA "ignored all of our members' claims" and had forced the union to wait another 10 weeks "to get back to the negotiating table." The workers are considering their strike options, the spokesman said.



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