

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.

Bangladeshi tea garden workers' strike enters second week

About 150,000 workers from over 200 tea gardens in Moulvibazar, Habiganj, and Chattagram Habiganj in Sylhet division remain on strike after walking out on August 13. The impoverished workers are demanding their daily wages be lifted from 120 taka (\$US1.50) to 300 taka.

Strikers have barricaded roads and the railway tracks to block transport in the district's capital Moulvibazar. The district administration officials with Moulvibazar police urged workers to withdraw the blockade after assuring them of conveying their demand to the prime minister's office.

The current industrial action began on August 9, when workers from 241 tea gardens stopped work for two hours to demand the wage increase. After a two-year pay freeze, tea garden owners only offered to increase the daily wage to 14 taka. While the Bangladesh Tea Workers Union accepted the offer, tea garden workers rejected this and ignored the union's return-to-work order.

The union tried to close down the strike again, after plantation owners agreed to increase the daily wage by 25 taka, but this was rejected again by the workers who insist on a 300-taka daily wage. Tripartite talks between the local government, the Bangladesh Tea Association and the union remain deadlocked.

India: Andhra Pradesh workers protest new labour laws

Hundreds of workers protested in Visakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh on August 22 against Modi government labour laws that consolidate 44 labour laws into four codes. Workers said the four labour codes would deprive them of their basic right to go on strike, form unions and to bargain with the management for fair compensation.

Protesters said new measures would lead to loss of job security with permanent jobs threatened by contract work, outsourcing and short-term employment. The four labour codes cover wage regulation, industrial relations, social security and occupational safety, health and working conditions.

Facing strong opposition from workers across India, the Modi government held an all-states meeting on August 25–26 to ensure that state governments enforce the new codes.

Maharashtra government teachers protest over job vacancies

Teachers from across Mumbai demonstrated on August 22 to demand the government fill vacant teaching posts across Maharashtra. The Bombay University and College Teachers' Union members protested at the Fort campus of the University of Mumbai over the issue.

Teachers also raised other demands, including pay increases for part-time teachers and the release of arbitrarily withheld arrears to M Phil-qualified teachers.

Protesting power workers in Telangana attacked by police

Low-paid contract workers from the National Thermal Power Corporation (NTPC) held a protest and gate meeting in Ramagundam, Peddapalli district in Telangana, on August 22 to demand management negotiate a new work agreement. Central Industrial Security Force (CISF) officers baton-charged the demonstrating workers to disperse them. At least ten workers sustained severe injuries with 70 others needing medical treatment for minor injuries.

Workers accused NTPC management of instructing the CISF to attack their protest. The workers are now wearing black badges, demanding action against the CISF and calling on management to pay for treatment of the injured workers and provide paid leave until they recover.

The contract workers were protesting management's refusal to provide jobs for their dependants and delaying promotions to senior workers and IT technicians that have been pending for two years.

Haryana workers demand pay rise

Health, education, childcare and other public sector employees, as well as manual labourers from a range of industries, demonstrated in Karnal on August 21 for wage increases and other demands. The protest was organised by the Rashtriya Kamgar Sangh and included public works employees, mandi labourers and workers from rice mills and brick-kilns.

Protesters planned to picket the chief minister's office but were stopped by police. They ended the protest after being assured of a meeting with the chief minister. Demonstrators said most employees in the state were underpaid and demanded the monthly honorarium of all workers be increased to 15,000 rupees (\$US188). They said the midday meal workers are only paid salaries for 10 months in the year.

Swiggy food delivery workers in Bengaluru demand a fixed wage

Swiggy fast-food delivery workers, organised by the All-India Gig Workers' Union, demonstrated in Bengaluru on August 19 demanding fixed salaries of 26,000 rupees (\$US326) per month, in line with the minimum wage demanded by the central trade unions.

Their current pay ranges from 15 to 45 rupees per delivery, depending on the distance covered. They are paid an incentive bonus but only if they do more than 25 deliveries per day. Most days they do not get this number of orders. Without incentives their daily income is very low and they cannot survive on the rising cost of living.

Sri Lankan government printing workers protest

Hundreds of printing workers protested on Wednesday outside their factory over the rising cost of essential items. They carried placards and chanted slogans denouncing cuts in allowances, overtime payments and incentives.

The workers later marched to the ministry of mass media and demonstrated outside the building. The protest was called by the alliance of government printing unions.

Northern Territory public school teachers strike against wage freeze

Hundreds of Northern Territory public school teachers from 161 schools in Darwin and Palmerston walked out for four hours on August 19 and protested in Darwin against the Labor government's proposed enterprise agreement, which included a pay freeze until the end of 2024.

Teachers were also promised a \$4,000 "bonus" if the agreement is approved and annual lump sum payments of \$2,000 in October for four years, all of which are subject to taxes. Teachers rejected this offer, which was negotiated with the Australian Education Union (AEU), in March.

As well as calling for an end to the Labor government's pay freeze on all public sector employees and a decent increase to make for years of stagnant wages, the teachers want their agreement to address the teacher shortages and unsustainable workloads.

The four-year wage freeze on public sector workers was imposed in November 2020 as part of the Labor government's "budget repair roadmap." The freeze was calculated to save the government \$424 million over four years.

Cash in transit security workers in Queensland strike

Over 50 members of the Transport Workers Union (TWU) from cash-in-transit companies Linfox and Point 2 Point Secure walked off the job for three days on August 19 in Brisbane, Bundaberg, Rockhampton and Cairns to demand an improved enterprise agreement. Workers said they will extend strike action if a deal is not reached.

The workers have not had a pay increase since 2019 and are demanding a wage increase in line with inflation. The official inflation rate for Brisbane is 7.3 percent.

Knorr-Bremse workers hold third national stoppage

Over 80 workers from the rail carriage parts manufacturer Knorr-Bremse stopped work across Australia on August 19 to demand a better enterprise agreement deal. The action followed nationwide stoppages on August 11 and 17. Knorr-Bremse, which make the braking systems, entrance systems and heating, ventilation and air conditioning systems for rail carriages and locomotives, has factories in Sydney, Brisbane, Melbourne and Perth.

The workers have not had a pay increase since 2020. They are covered by the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union, Electrical Trades Union and the Australian Services Union.

While workers want a pay increase that keeps up with the cost of living, the unions have told management they will settle for 3 percent back pay, and annual 4 percent increases for the life of the agreement, an effective pay cut.

The Reserve Bank of Australia anticipates that the consumer price index will rise to over 7 percent by the end of 2022. It was 5.1 percent in 2021.

While Knorr-Bremse presented a "union-endorsed" agreement on Tuesday, it was rejected by workers.

Escalator and lift installation workers in Canberra strike

About 30 Electrical Trades Union (ETU) members from Kone Canberra escalator and lift installer walked off the job for 7.5 hours on August 19 to demand a "fair" pay rise and improved conditions in a new enterprise agreement. Overtime bans have been imposed with further stoppages of 8 hours and 24 hours planned.

After three months of union negotiations, workers unanimously rejected a 14.5 percent pay rise offer over four years from management, saying it fell short of inflation and industry standards. They also want improved sick leave, redundancy protection and income protection insurance.

Paramedics in Tasmania protest exhausting working hours

About 40 ambulance paramedics knocked off duty at their scheduled time and demonstrated at the ambulance bay entry ramp of the Royal Hobart Hospital on August 19 to protest long work hours due to ambulance ramping at the hospital.

Paramedics complained that ramping is threatening patients' lives. Ambulance ramping happens when hospital emergency departments are full and cannot admit new patients. Early this month, a patient at the Launceston General Hospital in northern Tasmania died after being ramped for more than nine hours.

The paramedics are members of the Health and Community Services Union (HACSU) which is opposing any unified action by health workers to address the crisis in hospitals which are at breaking point due to the removal of all safety restriction to control COVID-19.

South Australian hospital health workers protest loss of free parking

Hundreds of public hospital health workers, including cleaners, caterers,

orderlies and sterilisation technicians, demonstrated outside the offices of SA Health in Adelaide on August 19 to protest the loss of free parking. Parking fees of up to \$1,300 per annum are unavoidable for hundreds of low paid public health workers and will cut deeply into their income.

United Workers Union (UWU) members are calling on the state Labor government to rescind its decision to end free parking at hospitals. Free and subsidised parking was introduced by South Australia's Covid-19 Emergency Declaration as an incentive to support front-line hospital staff who were working extra shifts and longer hours.

The protesting UWU members were supposed to have been joined by public hospital nurses, however, the Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation (ANMF) announced that it was withdrawing from the protest at the last moment. It said it was pursuing separate negotiations after the state premier promised to negotiate parking compensation for nurses in a new enterprise agreement within weeks.

New Zealand packaging manufacture workers strike

On August 24, 100 workers at two Auckland packaging plants owned by manufacturer Visy held a 24-hour strike, demanding a 10 percent pay rise. It was the first strike by these workers in 25 years.

The union members picketed Visy Board NZ and Charta Packaging in Wiri. The workers are demanding at least a 10 percent increase on their regular pay in a one-year deal. They also want overtime pay starting from 40 hours rather than 50 hours because most employees do up to 70 hours work a week.

An E t? delegate who has been at Visy Board for 25 years told media, "We are doing long hours to survive. I work around 64 hours up to 70 hours a week. We've got no time with family, no time with friends, no happy hour. It's no life." Another worker said, "We spend 90 percent of our time working... We don't want to be doing these long hours, but if we don't then we will struggle. We feel we don't have a choice, and it's killing our health as well."

Visy is one of the world's largest privately-owned recycling and packaging companies, with more than 120 sites across New Zealand, Australia and Thailand. It has 11 facilities in New Zealand employing more than 900 workers.

Air Calédonie strike shut down by union without resolution

Domestic flights resumed in New Caledonia this week after unions suspended a series of strikes at Air Calédonie. The carrier had disrupted schedules for nearly two weeks as a dispute over the status of a co-pilot resulted in stoppages, causing the airline to intermittently halt services.

The co-pilot Chrystelle Cejo is reported to have had training gaps because of problems caused by the COVID pandemic, which resulted in the company suspending her contract without renewal. The Kanak UTSKE Union insisted she be allowed to resume work and a renewal of her contract immediately.

Last Saturday the unions announced the suspension of their action to allow school children to fly. The unions said the government had agreed to organise a "working group" during which the unions could raise the grievances of all of Air Calédonie's employees. They thanked the government for upholding a "dialogue" and apologised for the inconvenience caused to the public.



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