

# 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: Bihar sanitation workers on indefinite strike

Over 40,000 contract and daily wage sanitation workers from 19 civic bodies across Bihar state have been on strike since August 27. The Bihar Local Bodies Karamchari Sanyukt Sangharsh Morcha and Bihar State Local Body Employees Federation organised the action.

The unions are advancing 11 demands, including permanent jobs for contract sanitation workers, equal pay for equal work, an end to outsourcing, pension benefits, and employment of family members of deceased workers and other benefits. Workers say they will remain on strike until the government listens to their demands.

A union spokesman said regular sanitation workers of urban local bodies get a monthly wage of 40,000 rupees (\$US504) while daily wage workers performing the same work get only 10,000 rupees (\$US126). However, the unions are demanding a wage of only 18,000 rupees a month for contract and daily wage workers.

## Flex printers in Andhra Pradesh protest loss of jobs

Flex printers and workers demonstrated outside the Prakasam Bhavan (District Administration Office) in Ongole on August 29 calling for the Andhra Pradesh state government to reverse its ban on vinyl flex banners.

The Andhra Pradesh Flex Banners Printers Association said over a million workers in the state could lose their jobs if the government maintained its ban. They proposed that flex banners could be recycled and reused for different applications, such as footwear, geo-textiles and canal linings.

## Madhya Pradesh railway workers fight to defend jobs

Western Railway Employees Union members demonstrated at the integrated crew lobby in Ujjain, Madhya Pradesh on August 28 to protest railway administration's plan to abolish the local running staff and their headquarters.

Train managers, loco pilots, assistant loco pilots, station masters and employees of operational, mechanical, commercial, S&T and electric departments from Ujjain headquarters were involved in the protest.

Workers alleged that the temporary posting of workers from Ujjain headquarters to other facilities during the COVID-19 pandemic has been made permanent. They said Ujjain running staff are not being provided with work even though they are presenting for duties.

## Sri Lankan State Engineering Corporation workers demand wages

State Engineering Corporation (SEC) workers protested outside the corporation's head office in Colombo on Monday to demand their August salaries. Workers said that their July salaries were delayed and paid in two instalments. An SEC official said construction work across the country had stalled for two years and that many employees had been dismissed.

## Bangladeshi light vehicle drivers demonstrate for higher pay

Bangladeshi drivers of private taxis, cars, auto-tempo and auto-rickshaws demonstrated outside the Dhaka Press Club on August 19 demanding a minimum wage increase of 25,000 taka (\$US264) to keep pace with the skyrocketing costs of essentials and fuel.

The Dhaka District Taxi, Taxi Car, Auto-tempo, Auto-rickshaw Drivers and Workers' Union are demanding fixed wages and working hours, identity cards, vacations, food allowance, labour law rights and other demands.

The drivers said that they work for 14 to 15 hours a day for a meagre wage and are not provided any work facilities. There are over 500,000 drivers of light vehicles working in the capital Dhaka.

## Northern Territory public sector workers strike over wage freeze

Over 1,000 public sector workers in Australia's Northern Territory (NT) struck on Thursday to demand an end to the territory government's four-year public sector wage freeze. Teachers, firefighters and correctional services officers walked out and demonstrated outside the territory parliament in Darwin and at the Alice Springs Town Hall.

Other public sector workers, including nurses, power and water utility workers, aboriginal health practitioners and other government workers held simultaneous rallies during lunch breaks or while off duty.

The four-year wage freeze on 20,000 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.

Up until now the NT public sector unions have only organised isolated separate action in opposition to the freeze. The Australian Education Union called out hundreds of teachers from 161 schools for four hours in Darwin and nearby Palmerston on August 19. This followed industrial action called by the United Workers Union covering correctional officers and firefighters in May and July.

### **Gympie Regional Council workers locked out after one-hour strike**

About 100 workers from Gympie Regional Council (GRC), 170 kilometres north of Queensland's capital Brisbane, walked off the job for an hour on Wednesday morning in their dispute for an improved enterprise agreement. Workers demonstrated outside the Gympie Town Hall holding placards saying "Decent Wage Increase Now" and other slogans. The council administrators responded by locking the workers out.

The workers are members of the Construction Forestry Maritime Mining and Energy Union (CFMMEU), Australian Workers Union (AWU) and The Services Union (TSU).

The unions have been negotiating with GRC since last December for a new agreement. Workers rejected the council's original offer which included annual pay increases of 3.5 percent. The CPI for Brisbane over the last 12 months was 7.3 percent and expected to increase. Workers also want the new enterprise agreement to address understaffing.

Management produced a revised offer after CFMMEU and AWU members threatened to strike on August 24. The offer proposes 4 percent annual pay increases, back dated to 19 December 2021, or a minimum of \$45 for the first year followed by 3.5 percent or \$40 per week in the second year and 3 percent or \$37 per week in the third year. The unions and GRC are scheduled to resume negotiations on September 6.

### **Stonnington council workers reject pay offer**

Over 200 members of the Australian Services Union (ASU) from Stonnington City Council, within the metropolitan area of Melbourne, voted on August 25 to take industrial action after rejecting the council's latest pay offer.

The ASU, representing gardeners, leisure facility operators, roads maintenance workers and office staff, said the council's proposed enterprise agreement cut conditions and real wages. It included the reduction of overtime penalty entitlements by extending the ordinary workday by two hours and offered a below inflation wage increase of just 2 percent. The official inflation rate for Melbourne is above 6 percent.

### **Workers at Tasmanian mining equipment supplier take industrial action**

Ten workers from mining equipment supplier Epiroc, in Tasmania's northwest, began industrial action this week in their dispute for a new enterprise agreement. The workers, who are stationed at Burnie and mine sites in Zeehan and Rosebery, voted in July to take industrial action that could include work stoppages ranging from 15 minutes to an indefinite period, an overtime ban and visiting other sites.

The Australian Manufacturing Workers Union says that the current agreement expired two years ago but that Epiroc has still not presented a proposed agreement. The workers' pay has been frozen during that period.

### **Queensland private hospital nurses protest low pay and inadequate staffing**

About 50 members of the Queensland Nurses and Midwives' Union (QNMU) from the Greenslopes Private Hospital in Brisbane walked out for an hour and demonstrated outside the hospital on Tuesday in protest against low pay and unsafe staffing levels. Nurses held placards saying "Patient care, not price of shares", "Burnout caused this turnout" and "Patients before profits", among others. The action followed a similar protest at the hospital on July 14.

Nurses are demanding a pay rise in line with inflation, increased staffing and nurse to patient ratios as outlined in the state government's safe staffing laws in public hospitals. Greenslopes is owned by Ramsey Health which does not have minimum ratios or staffing levels at any of its facilities.

The QNMU has been attempting to negotiate an enterprise agreement at Greenslopes since July 2019. Ramsey is yet to provide a wage offer.

### **Australian Capital Territory water utility workers strike**

About 70 maintenance workers at the state-owned water utility company Icon Water walked out for two hours on Wednesday in their dispute for a pay increase. The Electrical Trades Union (ETU) has called on the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) Labor government to intervene in the dispute after Icon Water offered an enterprise agreement with a below inflation pay increase.

Workers have been offered a 12 percent pay increase over four years, which is 3 percent a year. The union is demanding 5 percent annual increases in a three-year agreement. However, this is still below the ACT's inflation rate which increased by 6.3 percent over 12 months to June this year.

### **South32 mine workers in New South Wales on strike**

Thirty members of the Electrical Trades Union (ETU) are taking rolling strike action at South32's Appin coal mine in the Illawarra, south of Sydney. They are fighting for better wages and conditions. Workers began protected industrial action on August 25, after unanimously voting down the company's enterprise agreement (EA) offer.

The ETU has been trying for several months to negotiate a deal that would suit South32, including hearings in the Fair Work Commission. The union claimed that the company was not willing to pay industry standards. Workers want a pay increase to compensate for inflation and retention of existing conditions.

### **Pacific National train drivers in Queensland strike**

Over 50 train drivers from the rail freight haulage company Pacific National Intermodal in Queensland walked out on strike for 25 hours on August 29 in a dispute for a new enterprise agreement. They also imposed indefinite bans on overtime and specific shift changes. Rail networks impacted include Rockhampton, Moolabin and Townsville.

The Rail Tram and Bus Union and the Australian Federated Union of Locomotive Engineers want improved family friendly rosters, a “fair” wage increase and other demands. The unions claimed that Pacific National wants to cut conditions and the “lowest pay increase in recent history,” despite six months of negotiations.

### **Queensland government construction workers strike for pay rise**

State government construction and building maintenance workers walked off the job on Thursday and rallied in Brisbane to demand equal wages with private sector workers. Protesters included carpenters, electricians, building engineers and plumbers from RoadTek, QBuild and Queensland Health.

The decision to strike was taken by members of the Electrical Trades Union, Plumbers Union, the Australian Workers Union and the Australian Builders Construction Union, representing QBuild and Transport and Main Roads construction teams, at union meetings the previous Friday.

Workers say they are paid less than teachers and police and want to increase their base salary rate, which is around \$39 per hour, to \$45 an hour.

### **Santos offshore oil and gas plant workers in Western Australia strike**

Over 40 production and maintenance workers at the Santos oil and gas processing hub on Varanus Island (74 kilometres off the north coast of Western Australia) have been taking protected industrial action since July 21. This includes rolling stoppages between 30 minutes and 2 hours, work bans on overtime, restrictions on crane operations and other action.

The Australian Workers Union has been attempting to reach a deal with Santos for a new enterprise agreement for more than two years. The union has accused Santos of stalling and purposely disrupting negotiations. According to the union, Santos has rejected the union’s job security demand for the Varanus Island workforce and told the union to reduce its claims to two or three issues.

While Santos has withdrawn its threat to dock the pay of workers taking industrial action it has employed scab crane operators in an attempt to maintain production.

### **Shell Prelude offshore LNG processing plant workers win new agreement**

About 160 maintenance workers at Shell’s offshore floating LNG processing plant ended 76 days of industrial action on August 23 after their unions, the Electrical Trades Union, Maritime Union of Australia and Australian Workers Union, reached a tentative enterprise agreement deal with Shell.

The workers were formerly employed on individual contracts which the unions said were below industry standard. The new agreement provides an

annual pay increase up to \$US33,800, income protection, increased over-cycle payment, fixed rosters, clearly defined classifications and other improvements.

While the unions have hailed an agreement from Shell that prevents Shell from outsourcing core crew jobs, this falls short of the workers’ demand that all jobs be protected from being outsourced to contractors. Workers begin voting on the tentative agreement on September 3.

### **Grain food processing workers in New South Wales vote to strike**

Ten electrical maintenance workers at grain-food processor Manildra Group’s Bomaderry mill, south of Sydney, voted on August 24 to take industrial action after months of failed negotiations for a new enterprise agreement. A spokesman for the Electrical Trades Union said members want a fair pay rise, income protection and issues around fatigue management addressed.

Industrial action could include work stoppages from 30 minutes to 24 hours and bans on overtime, after-hours callouts, high voltage switching and operations. The union has not announced when industrial action will commence.

### **Primary health care nurses rally across New Zealand**

Primary health care nurses rallied in key New Zealand cities on Monday calling for additional funding from the Labour government. Hour-long lunchtime rallies involving hundreds of nurses were held in Auckland, Tauranga, Hamilton, Wellington, and Christchurch.

The nurses work in private practices, primarily doctors’ surgeries and clinics. The NZ Nurses Organisation (NZNO) said a nurse at a medical centre generally earns between 10 and 20 percent less than their counterparts in public hospitals, while nurses working for Māori providers can earn up to 25 percent less.

Primary care nurses are joining a wave of strikes by other workers over low pay and deteriorating conditions in the health system due to COVID. In May, 10,000 health professionals, including anaesthetic technicians, audiologists, occupational therapists, dental technicians, social workers and physiotherapists, took industrial action after rejecting a below-inflation pay offer from District Health Boards.

The NZNO is restricting the nurses’ current action to toothless appeals to pressure Health Minister Andrew Little, inviting members of the public to sign postcards asking him to ensure health authorities provide the funding needed “to properly value” the nurses.

### **Auckland SkyCity casino workers walk out over pay offer**

Workers at Auckland’s SkyCity casino walked off the job for two and a half hours last Saturday evening in a campaign for better pay. About 60 workers picketed the Auckland CBD premises with placards and flags. The strike action began after workers voted to reject a pay offer of 4 to 6 percent for 90 percent of staff.

Unite Union advocate Mike Treen said members deserve a living wage. “We have an offer that is still \$1.50 less than the living wage ... We think that is just not adequate and is three percent behind inflation, so it’s

actually a wage cut,” he declared. Treen added that staff who have worked at SkyCity since it opened were paid the same hourly rate as new employees doing the same job.

Unite is one of several unions running the bogus “Living wage” campaign among low-paid workers, promoting an hourly pay rate of \$23.65. This is only marginally above the legal minimum of \$21.20 and is rapidly falling behind the escalating cost of living. Inflation is running at 7.3 percent.



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