

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 government shuts down sanitation workers strike

Striking contract sanitation workers across Bihar state returned to work on Tuesday following a court order to end their 11-day strike. The Bihar Local Bodies Samyukt Sangarsh Morcha and Bihar Rajya Sthai Nikay Karmchhari Mahasang [unions] ordered the strikers back to work, claiming they had received a “positive assurance” from the government.

Over 40,000 contract and daily wage sanitation workers from 19 civic bodies across Bihar struck on August 27. The unions put forward 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 vowed to remain on strike until the government met their demands.

Permanent sanitation workers at urban local bodies receive a 40,000-rupee (\$US504) monthly wage while daily wage workers performing the same work are paid 10,000 rupees (\$US126). The unions, however, were only demanding 18,000 rupees a month for contract and daily wage workers.

The government had given no concrete assurance that it would attempt to reach an agreement on any of the workers’ demands, saying only that the grievances raised by the sanitation workers would be addressed.

Protests by Delhi childcare workers against sackings enters sixth month

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. The workers have been continuously protesting against the illegal termination since March.

On Wednesday they demonstrated outside the Delhi Commission for Women chairperson’s residence. The Delhi State Anganwadi Workers and Helpers Union called the protest, saying the whole system works against the working masses.

Thousands of poorly paid 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 the strikers. 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.

There are over 10,000 anganwadi centres and 20,000 anganwadi workers and helpers in Delhi. The current monthly honorarium for anganwadi workers and helpers is 9,678 rupees (\$US128) and 4,839 rupees respectively. The strikers want a 25,000-rupee (\$US330) monthly wage for anganwadi workers and 20,000 rupees for helpers.

Kerala insecticide factory workers stop work to demand unpaid wages

Hindustan Insecticide Limited (HIL) factory workers in Kochi, Kerala state, walked off the job on Monday and demonstrated, blocking vehicles entering and leave the plant’s main gate. Workers said they have not been paid since June and security guards had left because they had not been paid for six months.

One hour into the protest management rushed to organise a meeting with the Joint Trade Unions of HIL. Union leaders closed down the strike after accepting a commitment from management to pay one month’s salary within two days. There are 71 regular employees and 24 temporary staff at the factory.

Madhya Pradesh power workers strike over unpaid wages

About 300 workers from the Kshema Power and Infrastructure Company in Dhamana, Madhya Pradesh struck work on September 1 to demand unpaid wages. This included security guards, patrolling workers, watchmen and other labourers, who have not been paid for 15 days, some for even three months.

On September 4, they sent a delegation to the company’s office in Badnawar but were ignored. In response they forced company officials off the premises and locked the gates. Although management eventually paid the workers their arrears they were immediately sacked.

Tamil Nadu government road maintenance workers demand compensation for temporary suspensions

Tamil Nadu Highways Department Road Employees’ Association members demonstrated in Dindidul, Tamil Nadu on September 7

demanding the government pay wages for the 41-month period they were suspended in 2002. Over 9,800 workers were suspended due to government financial restraints. Workers want the period of suspension to be included as a work period.

Tamil Nadu power distribution workers protest

About 1,000 workers from the Tamil Nadu Generation and Distribution Corporation in Chennai protested in front of the finance secretary's office in Anna Salai on September 6 to demand an increase in dearness allowance.

Cambodian police harass workers campaigning for minimum pay rise

On September 1, police suspended production at the Shoe Premier factory 2 in Takeo province, in Cambodia's south, ordering members of the Federation of Free Trade Union of Workers of the Kingdom of Cambodia (FTUWKC) to remove campaign postings from their Facebook page.

According to a media report, police officers intimidated the local FTUWKC President Sao Thoeurn, demanding that she sign an agreement to not post any more material on Facebook that "can lead to problematic issues that affect society."

With inflation skyrocketing to 6.5 percent in the first half of 2022, Cambodian workers want the minimum wage for textile and footwear workers to be increased from \$US194 a month to \$215.

The National Council on Minimum Wage (NCMW), which includes the government, employers and union representatives to determine the 2033 minimum wage for the textile and leather goods sector is due to announce a new minimum wage on September 23.

In 2021, employers set a figure of \$183.4, while unions argued for \$214.2 a month. The NCMW initially voted to keep the 2022 minimum wage for these sectors unchanged from the 2021 figure, \$192, until Prime Minister Hun Sen, fearing reprisals from workers, stepped in to add \$2 to the total, making it \$194 per month.

Indonesian workers and students protest higher fuel prices

Thousands of workers and students demonstrated in Jakarta and other Indonesian cities on Tuesday to protest the Widodo government's decision to increase subsidised prices, bumping up the cost of fuel by 30 percent. Over 3,000 people rallied in Central Jakarta while thousands demonstrated in Bekasi, Bogor and several other cities.

Before imposing the hike, the government said it was handing 600,000 rupiah (\$US40) in cash handouts to more than 20 million people to "cushion" the impact of higher fuel prices.

In an attempt to stall further protests, the Indonesian Labor Unions Confederation told workers that it will call a national stoppage of 5 million workers in December to protest increased cost of living while wages remain stagnant.

Knorr-Bremse workers hold fourth national strike

Over 80 workers from the stopped work across Australia on September 2 in their dispute for a new enterprise agreement. The action followed nationwide stoppages on August 11, 17 and 19. The German multinational, which makes braking and subsystems for rail and commercial vehicles, has factories in Sydney, Brisbane, Melbourne and Perth.

The workers are represented by three unions, the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union, Electrical Trades Union and the Australian Services Union, which have been trying to reach a deal with Knorr-Bremse since May last year. The workers have not had a pay rise since 2020.

Last month, workers overwhelmingly rejected the company's latest pay offer saying it was well below the cost of living. The unions have told management, however, they will settle for 3 percent back pay, and annual 4 percent increases for the life of the agreement. This is an effective pay cut compared to Australia's current official inflation rate of 6.1 percent. 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.

Queensland cash-in-transit security workers hold second 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 on a five-day strike on Monday in Brisbane, Bundaberg, Rockhampton and Cairns to demand an improved enterprise agreement. Cash is not being delivered to ATMs (automatic teller machines) or businesses. TWU members struck for three days on August 19 over the issue.

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

Gympie Regional Council office workers walk out

About 40 administration workers from the Gympie Regional Council (GRC), 170 kilometres north of Queensland's capital Brisbane, walked off the job at 3 p.m. on Wednesday in opposition to the council's proposed enterprise agreement. The workers are members of The Services Union (TSU).

The walkout followed a one-hour strike on the morning of August 31 which was joined by outdoor workers from the Construction Forestry Maritime Mining and Energy Union (CFMMEU) and the Australian Workers Union (AWU). Management responded by locking them out for the day.

GRC is refusing to improve its pay increase offer to office staff of 10.5 percent over a three year agreement. Workers have rejected this offer on several occasions. The TSU is demanding a sub-inflation increase of only 10.5 percent over two years in instalments of 5.5 percent in the first year followed by 5 percent.

Management has produced a revised offer for outdoor workers covered by the CFMMEU and AWU. The offer proposes 4 percent annual pay increases, back dated to December 19, 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 two unions were

scheduled to meet with GRC on September 6 for further talks.

Brisbane Airport cleaners hold fourth strike in two months

About 60 members of the United Workers Union (UWU) employed as cleaners by Brisbane Airport subcontractor Securecorp walked off the job on the morning of August 29. With supporters they held a procession of over 100 cars past the airport waving protest flags. The action followed three two-hour work stoppages that began in July. Workers are maintaining a ban on wearing their uniform.

The UWU has been in negotiations with Securecorp for a new enterprise agreement since January. Workers want a wage increase to take them above the minimum wage, which is only \$21.38 an hour. Other demands are for an airport allowance to account for the extra costs they incur working at the airport and an end to understaffing.

Safety is another issue they want fixed. They want an end to 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.

Bega Cheese workers in Western Australia strike

United Workers Union members from the Bega Cheese dairy processing factory in Bentley, a suburb of Western Australia's capital Perth, walked off the job on a five-day strike on Monday in their dispute over the company's proposed enterprise agreement. This is the first strike at the plant in 25 years.

Workers rejected the company's original pay increase offer of 1.5 percent which has since been revised to the sub-inflation rate of 2.75 percent. The union has demanded a 6 percent increase which is still below Perth's inflation rate of 7.2 percent.

The UWU claimed that the workers are currently paid \$6 per hour less than Bega Cheese workers in Australia's eastern states. However, the union's pay demand would not close the wages gap by lifting the hourly rate by only \$3.

Bega Cheese is one of Australia's biggest dairy food manufacturers. The company's latest financial results showed a profit of \$72 million, an amount that doubled during the COVID-19 pandemic. Its chief executives' remuneration package is valued at \$2 million a year.

Readings book shop workers in Melbourne vote for industrial action

Retail and Fast Food Workers Union (RAFFWU) members at one of Melbourne's largest book retailers Readings voted in a secret ballot that closed on September 2 and unanimously approved taking protected industrial action in their dispute over a new enterprise agreement (EA). The workers organised a picket at the retailer's Carlton shop for 11 a.m. this Saturday. Readings rushed out a non-union deal in an attempt to quash the industrial action.

The vote follows four years of negotiations between the RAFFWU and Readings management for their first union negotiated enterprise agreement. In July, Readings and RAFFWU negotiated a deal under supervision of the Fair Work Commission that included a 4.6 percent pay

increase. However, Readings later reneged on the deal and implemented a 2-year pay freeze.

According to an RAFFWU spokesman, negotiations with Readings began after workers complained of sexual harassment, impossible living wages, insecure employment and that some workers were being pressured to work for free by writing book reviews in exchange for vouchers rather than pay.

Workers at Readings Carlton bookshop held street protests on August 6 and 19 to rally public support. Readings employs 170 people, many of whom are casual or part-time and on a minimum wage across its seven stores in Melbourne. Only 28 workers are members of the union. Union members want a living wage, pay transparency, pay for all work, back-pay, codified profit share and a union approved agreement.

New Zealand packaging workers expand strikes

Around 200 workers from South Auckland-based companies Visy Board, Charta Packaging and Opal Kiwi Packaging took strike action and picketed in Wiri on Monday in an ongoing struggle over pay and conditions. The workers had recently taken their first strike action in 25 years but this was the first time they had all gathered in the one location on the same day.

Workers previously rejected wage offers below the rate of inflation, which is running at 7.3 percent. Visy Board and Charta Packaging workers are demanding a 10 percent pay rise and overtime rates to apply after 40 hours, rather than 50 hours as is the case now. Many work between 60 and 70 hours per week to earn a liveable wage.

Workers at Opal Kiwi Packaging were the latest to join the escalating movement. About 90 workers from the Papatotoe factory in South Auckland struck and picketed on Friday 2 September. They had been on an overtime ban since the beginning of August, while another 80 at the company's plants in Hastings and Christchurch are on overtime bans.

An E Tu union organiser simply declared that in each case the union is seeking "a decent pay increase that keeps up with the cost of living." E Tu also said that Visy's current offer remains unacceptable to workers. The company hasn't moved on its overtime conditions, with overtime pay still only starting once workers have done more than 50 hours per week.

Opal, Visy and Charta Packaging are major players in the packaging industry, which sets a standard for pay and conditions across the sector. E Tu however, is limiting strikes to one day a week to send a "strong message" to the employers "to come to the table with a decent wage increase," i.e. to return to negotiations and strike a deal.



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