

# 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: Power utility workers protest in Delhi against privatisation

Engineers from power utilities in several Indian states rallied at Jantar Mantar in Delhi on November 23 against the Modi government's drive to privatise India's power distribution. Workers also demanded restoration of the old pension scheme and permanency for all outsourced employees.

The All India Power Engineers Federation (AIPEF) threatened that all 2.7 million electricity employees and engineers across India may be called to take strike action if the Modi government unilaterally implements the Electricity (Amendment) Bill.

An AIPEF spokesperson claimed that the legislation will hand over government-owned distribution networks to private sector investors on the false argument of giving consumers a choice of suppliers. The federation claimed that private investors are only interested in the profitable distribution networks in the cities, with non-profitable rural networks run down by the government.

Refusing to mobilise the entire work force in all public sectors that are similarly facing privatisation, the AIPEF is diverting workers' anger into dead-end appeals to state and union territory chief ministers.

## Swiggy food delivery workers' strike in Kerala enters third week

About 5,000 Swiggy Global delivery workers in Kochi are maintaining a strike that began on November 14 to demand higher wages. The workers held a protest march in Kochi on Tuesday to bring attention to their struggle.

The strikers are demanding a 35-rupee (\$US0.43) payment if the delivery distance is a 2.5 km radius, compared to the current rate of 20 rupees for a 4 km radius. Most of the current pay is spent on fuel, with the remainder barely enough to feed workers and their families.

These exploited low-paid workers are called delivery partners by the company to avoid labour laws and hide the oppressed conditions they are forced to endure. The All India Trade Union Congress organised the workers but has kept their strike isolated and not campaigned amongst other exploited delivery workers to extend the industrial action.

## Rural healthcare (Anganwadi) workers in Odisha on strike for better pay and conditions

Around 50,000 Anganwadi workers held a 24-hour sit down protest in front of the Odisha state assembly on November 21 as a part of their indefinite strike. The strike has shut down 60,000 Anganwadi centres across the state. Workers accused the government of ignoring their demands and being indifferent to their dedication and selfless service.

Strikers have eight demands, including employment status to all Anganwadi workers, a 5,000-rupee pension for retired workers and 500,000 rupees to the kin of workers who die on the job.

Anganwadi workers are currently paid 7,500 rupees (senior workers) with assistants only receiving 5,000 rupees. They want a monthly wage of 18,000 rupees (\$US221) and 9,000 rupees for assistants.

## Tamil Nadu state transport workers demand unpaid wages

Workers and pensioners from the Tamil Nadu State Transport Corporation (TNSTC) occupied the corporation's office in Madurai on November 22 to demand unpaid wages and pensions. Protesters, some who had taken voluntary retirement in May 2020, complained that they had not been paid the Dearness Allowance for the past 84 days, superannuation and other benefits.

## Bangladeshi carpet factory workers demand unpaid wages

Workers from the Turkish-owned Everest Rug Production factory at Shambaganj Ragabpur in Mymensingh held a three-day protest outside the factory on November 17 to demand unpaid salaries. They confined the factory manager in the office. Police were deployed to the plant during the protest.

The 93-strong all-female workforce are only paid once a month and on the basis of daily production targets. Workers began their protest after they learnt that the manager was about to leave without paying entitlements.

One employee, who had worked there for 16 years, said the factory authorities declared a lay-off on November 5 and assured workers of paying benefits for 45 days in two instalments, on December 8 and January 23. Another worker said her income ranged between 5,000 taka (\$US49) and 8,000 taka per month.

## Northern Territory public sector workers strike for higher pay

Hundreds of public sector workers in Australia's Northern Territory (NT) stopped work for four hours on November 17 over the government's latest pay offer. Workers, including public servants, firefighters and utility workers, rallied at parliament in Darwin and in Alice Springs.

Workers oppose the NT Labor government's below-inflation 2 percent annual pay offer. NT's consumer price index in June this year was 6.6 percent, meaning public sector wages would go backwards by 4 percent. These workers have not had a pay increase for over two years.

The miserly 2 percent pay offer was made in October, after a series of territory-wide strikes and protests forced the government to abandon its 2020 four-year pay freeze wages policy. 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 government calculated that it could save \$424 million over four years.

The NT government has been attempting to do deals with various unions by offering one-off lump sum payments on top of the 2 percent annual increase on offer.

### **Qantas short-haul cabin crew vote to strike for pay increase and defence of conditions**

Close to 99 percent of Qantas' short-haul cabin crew voted this week to take industrial action before Christmas in opposition to the airline's proposed enterprise agreement. The ballot approved industrial action ranging from minor work bans to strikes up to 24 hours. A spokesperson from the Flight Attendants Association of Australia (FAAA) said members were hoping that Qantas would come back to the negotiating table with a better pay offer, that doesn't degrade working conditions or pay.

Qantas' proposed agreement would result in cabin crew working for 12 hours instead of 9.5 hours and up to 14 hours in the case of a disruption. It would also mean rest periods between shifts get reduced to 10 hours when flights are disrupted, and no other crew is available. Cabin crew also rejected the below-inflation annual pay rise offer of 3 percent, which follows a two-year pay freeze that the union accepted during the COVID-19 pandemic. FAAA claimed Qantas was also looking to prevent current cabin crew from working on new aircraft, such as Boeing 737's replacement, the A321XLR.

As well as the 3 percent pay increase, Qantas is offering a \$5,000 bonus and 1,000 Qantas shares to all who sign up to the agreements, which unions have described as a "bribe." The union spokesperson said the cabin crew are the airline's biggest work group and receive only \$48,000 a year on average, just above the modern award.

Qantas announced on Wednesday that it expects an underlying profit before tax of between \$1.35 billion and \$1.45 billion. This represents a \$150 million increase to the profit range given in early October 2022.

### **Mondelez dairy processing workers in South Australian strike**

Key workers employed by Mondelez International at its Suttontown specialty cheese factory at Mount Gambier, South Australia, walked out for 24 hours on Thursday to demand a better enterprise agreement offer.

United Workers Union (UWU) members voted overwhelmingly in September to approve strike action after rejecting the company's pay offer of 7.5 percent over two years. The offer is a real pay cut compared with South Australia's official September quarter inflation rate of 7.3

percent. The UWU has told the company that it wants "a fair offer" and called for annual pay increases of just 5 percent, which is well below current inflation.

### **Crane Services workers' strike in South Australia enters third week**

About 30 members of the Construction Forestry Maritime Mining and Energy Union (CFMMEU) from mobile crane operator Crane Services, in Wingfield, a suburb of Adelaide, have been on strike since November 14 in a dispute over the company's proposed enterprise agreement.

The union has been in negotiations with Crane Services since April. The company has offered a below inflation pay increase of 9 percent over three years. According to the CFMMEU, the workers are not currently covered by a union-negotiated enterprise agreement and claimed that they are "desperately" underpaid compared to what they could earn elsewhere.

The union said workers want the enterprise agreement to include industry-standard pay and allowances, protection for the RDOs (rostered days off) they accrue through work performed, consultation terms relating to workplace changes and the right to have disputes settled by an "independent" umpire.

Crane Services operates with 50 different cranes across South Australia with operations in Adelaide, Barossa Valley, Ceduna and Whyalla.

### **Opal packaging workers strike again for pay increase and maintenance of conditions**

Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) members from Opal Packaging held a three-day national strike on November 16 over Opal's proposed enterprise agreement (EA). On November 18, over 300 AMWU members demonstrated outside the Opal headquarters at Burnley, in Melbourne, calling for an improved enterprise agreement.

The action followed a national 48-hour strike by 700 Opal workers on November 4 and a 48-hour stoppage on November 10. Opal workers across the country have rejected the company's proposed agreement, saying they will not accept a deal that attacks conditions won over 30 years and a below inflation pay deal.

### **Aged care workers at Southern Cross Care in Tasmania protest job cuts**

Nurses and support healthcare workers from Southern Cross Care (SCC), Tasmania's largest aged care provider, demonstrated outside the provider's facilities in Hobart and Launceston on Tuesday and Wednesday. They were opposing SCC's plan to slash specialist roles. Under the plan, all Enrolled Nurses (ENs), leisure, lifestyle and servery staff would be made redundant and replaced with care workers who would receive minimum training.

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The Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation (ANMF) accused SCC of using a legal loophole to replace experienced and crucial nursing roles with care workers who have undertaken an 8-hour course in assisting with medication administration. The ANMF claimed that the "household

model of care” would mean the only qualified person at its premises to deal with resident’s emergency health needs would be a Registered Nurse (RN), leaving them with a huge increased workload.

Although ANMF and Health and Community Services Union (HACSU) members are affected, the two unions oppose a combined campaign. The protests were held separately with the ANMF calling its protest on Tuesday in Launceston while the HACSU rally was held in Hobart on Wednesday. Both unions are diverting the workers action into appealing to the federal Labor government to intervene and close the loophole.

### **University of Melbourne veterinary hospital workers protest job losses**

Workers and community supporters protested this week against the planned closure of the U-Vet Animal Hospital in Werribee by the University of Melbourne (UoM). At least 100 workers will be affected and more than 80 are expected to lose their jobs.

The planned closure follows a \$10 million dollar cut to U-Vet’s budget in 2021, a subsequent closure of its 24-hour emergency service and dozens of redundancies.

The National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) does not oppose the closure or UoM’s restructure program but feigns concern that UoM did not adequately “consult” with the union. According to U-Vet staff, the facility has been the major provider of veterinary services in western Victoria and is Victoria’s only animal hospital where veterinary students can get hands-on experience with a wide variety of animals.

### **Auckland University staff hold week-long work-to-rule**

Professional (non-academic) staff at Auckland University have held a week-long work-to-rule in an ongoing pay dispute, working ordinary hours between 8:30 a.m. and 5 p.m. This is in addition to a ban by the university’s academic staff on entering and releasing student marks.

There is a growing wave of strikes and protests by tertiary sector staff across the country and internationally. About 7,000 lecturers, researchers, tutors and non-academic staff held a half-day strike at eight universities on October 6. It was the first nationwide strike in 20 years, called after 87 percent of Tertiary Education Union (TEU) members voted for national action demanding pay increases matching the soaring cost of living.

The TEU initially called for an 8 percent increase but then reduced that to 7.2 percent, the official inflation rate. Auckland University is only offering a 9 percent rise across two years, an effective pay cut.

A TEU branch spokesperson declared that the action was intended to “not impact students.” In fact, the union has suppressed all unified strike action and reduced staff to isolated protests at individual institutions. Preparing a sell-out, the TEU has been appealing to Education Minister Chris Hipkins to convene tripartite talks to negotiate a settlement.

The TEU recently announced it will take legal action against Auckland University of Technology (AUT) over the sacking of 170 staff. More than a thousand jobs have been cut across the sector since the onset of COVID, with no organised opposition from the union.

### **New Zealand journalists threaten to strike for higher pay**

*Stuff* journalists are reportedly threatening strike action if the company does not reach an agreement over pay. The stable of mastheads includes *Stuff* news website, the *Dominion Post*, *Sunday Star-Times* and the *Press*. It also publishes several regional and community newspapers.

Negotiations with the E Tu union involve both pay rises and the “step” structure that determines how future rises are determined. E Tu has requested a pay rise in line with inflation this year, followed by a 5 percent increase next year. *Stuff* has offered a rise below the figure claimed but above what is currently paid to unionised journalists.

It has been more than two decades since journalists at the *New Zealand Herald* and NZ Press Association walked off the job in 2001. The proposed *Stuff* strike would involve two-hour strikes on random days, escalating to a full day strike a week later.

### **New Zealand Firefighters Union cancels latest strikes**

The New Zealand Professional Firefighters Union (NZPFU) cancelled two strikes on Monday and Friday this week, claiming the Ardern Labour government is considering increasing funding to settle collective agreement negotiations. Fire and Emergency NZ, the union, have asked the government to increase the budget proposal it made two weeks ago.

The union meanwhile issued four more notices for one-hour strikes on December 2, 5, 9 and 12 in case “agreements reached on principle fall over due to lack of funding or due to any dispute on the final wording of the collective agreement.”

About 2,000 firefighters held two nationwide one-hour strikes in early August after rejecting a pay offer of just 1.5 to 2 percent, the first increase since July 2020 and well below inflation. Firefighters are also protesting a raft of issues, including overwork, inadequate staffing and aging equipment.

The NZPFU unilaterally cancelled scheduled strikes at the end of August, promising that a contract could be resolved in negotiations. Indicating growing anger from firefighters, however, the latest notice from the union leadership declared; “We understand that for members this is a frustrating situation,” and promising that a settlement is “within reach.”



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