

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

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The World Socialist Web Site invites workers and other readers to contribute to this regular feature.

India: Strike by Tamil Nadu rubber plantation workers enters second month

About 1,500 Kanniyakumari district rubber plantation workers from the state-owned Arasu Rubber Corporation (ARC), with plantations in Keeriparai, Manalodai, Chithar and Kodayar, have been on strike since November 7 in a struggle for better wages and job security.

The striking workers, whose contract expired two years ago, are maintaining a round-the-clock protest in front of the ARC factory in Keeriparai.

Tapping workers, manual workers, factory workers and watchers on the plantations are covered by the Kanniyakumari District Estate Workers Union, affiliated to the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU). The union is demanding that the daily wage be increased from 500 rupees (US\$6.10) to 540 rupees.

The union claimed that management, in the presence of three government ministers and labour department officials in Chennai, agreed in August to the pay increase, backdated to December 2019, but the agreement has not been kept.

Non-teaching staff at Punjab University demand overdue wages

About 3,000 non-teaching staff from Punjab University in Patiala held a sit-down protest outside the vice chancellor's office on Tuesday to demand payment of wages for October and November, which they have not received. One worker has launched a hunger strike.

Workers are also calling for the adoption of Sixth Pay Commission salary scales. One protester told the media that the university approved the new pay scales during a meeting of the university syndicate in March, but has not begun paying the increased wages. Workers are demanding that this pay increase be backdated to July 2021.

The workers said they faced extreme hardship, including penalties for late payment of bank loans and non-payment of college fees for their children, as well as the inability to pay day-to-day living expenses.

Maharashtra municipal health workers protest non-payment of bonus

Several hundred Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA) workers and other contract health workers held joint demonstrations in Nagpur on October 10 and November 22 to demand the Nagpur Municipal Corporation (NMC) pay bonuses that have been pending for several years. The workers are employed in Urban Primary Health Centres and the National Tuberculosis Elimination Program in the NMC jurisdiction.

Workers complained that even though they have been employed for several years to implement government health policy at the grassroots level, they are still not permanent and have to renew their contract every 11 months.

Bic Cello factory workers in Uttarakhand protest factory closure

Around 1,500 workers from the Bic Cello pen and stationery factory at Haridwar, in North India's Uttarakhand state, have lost their jobs after Bic closed the factory last week. Many of the workers, who are mainly women, have been employed at the factory for 10 to 15 years. The distressed workers picketed the factory gate, then later demonstrated at the labour commissioner's office demanding the immediate reopening of the factory.

Tasmanian paramedics maintain work bans demanding pay increase and safe staffing levels

Over 200 emergency paramedics at the state-run Ambulance Tasmania are maintaining work bans and other low-level industrial action. Workers began the struggle in August, demanding a pay increase and increased staffing levels.

The limited industrial action called by the Health and Community Services Union (HACSU) includes a ban on non-urgent inter-hospital transfers between midnight and 6 a.m., wearing union branded clothing and writing slogans on the side of their ambulances.

Paramedics rejected the Liberal government's latest enterprise agreement (EA) offer in October, saying the pay increase was "paltry" and the government had ignored their log of claims. The pay offer included a \$2,000 sign-on bonus and pay increases of 3.25 percent in the first year and 3 percent in the second year. This would amount to a massive pay cut in real terms. The cost of living has risen even more sharply in Tasmania than elsewhere in the country, with inflation for the year ending September reaching 8.6 percent, compared with 7.3 percent nationally.

The workers are demanding that the government address critically low staffing levels as well as ambulance ramping at hospitals, which they

claim has stretched ambulance services to the limit and is causing burnout.

Paramedics complained that 10-hour day shifts become 12 hours, 12-hour afternoon shifts become 14 hours and 14-hour night shifts become 16 hours, with little to no time for breaks. On August 19, more than 20 paramedics walked off the job at the end of their rostered shift and demonstrated outside Royal Hobart Hospital to protest long hours due to ambulance ramping at the hospital.

Paramedics are demanding a pay increase that reflects the rising cost of living, increased recruitment and training and adequate funding for health services to alleviate bed-block at hospital emergency wards.

New South Wales public hospital pharmacy staff implement bans against excessive workload

Pharmaceutical staff at two major public hospitals in Wyong and Gosford, in the Central Coast Local Health District (CCLHD) north of Sydney, have started low-level work bans in opposition to excessive workloads. The workers say they are routinely expected to skip meal breaks and stay back after hours to complete work, but are not being paid overtime.

The limited bans called by the Health Services Union (HSU) include refusing requests for dispensary services after 4 p.m. and restrictions on dispensing for outpatients. In addition, the workers are only covering one ward per shift and warned they will close cancer wards if there is no specialist pharmacist physically in the cancer service pharmacy.

The HSU complained that the CCLHD was “not providing a plan” for how to manage workloads following the recent announcement of significant staff cuts in both Wyong and Gosford pharmacies. The primary concern of the HSU bureaucracy is not protecting the jobs of its members, but ensuring that the union retains its position as the industrial police force of management to enforce the cuts.

Although jobs are being slashed throughout the CCLHD, the HSU bureaucracy has kept the pharmacists’ dispute low-key and isolated, preventing a united struggle with workers in other poorly staffed hospital departments.

Team Global Express vehicle maintenance workers in Queensland walk out

Seven vehicle maintenance workers at the Townsville depot of freight transport company Team Global Express walked off the job this week to demand improved pay and conditions.

Worker Chris Payet told the *Courier Mail*: “We’ve been trying to get a pay increase for probably six to seven years. The last increase we did get was actually a bonus we were given instead of upping our hourly rate.”

The company proposed increasing the hourly rate from \$35.50 to \$38. This was rejected, with workers pointing out that diesel mechanics with comparable skills elsewhere in the industry receive a minimum starting rate of \$42 per hour.

The workers are also seeking the restoration of higher employer superannuation contributions, which were slashed last year, shortly before Global Express was split from Toll and acquired by Allegro Funds. Payet said: “Right when they were about to take over, we got our super taken away from us, we used to get 12.5 [percent] and all of a sudden it dropped to 10.5.”

Australian Capital Territory government workers strike over pay

About 300 Australian Capital Territory (ACT) general service officers (GSOs) walked off the job for three hours on Thursday and rallied outside the ACT Legislative Assembly building in Canberra to demand a pay rise from the territory Labor government.

Members of the Construction Maritime Mining and Forestry Union (CFMEU) and the United Workers Union (UWU) are in dispute over the government’s proposed enterprise agreement (EA). GSOs, employed in cleaning, building and maintenance trades and facility management, are among the ACT’s lowest paid workers.

Workers want the current wage classification system altered to reflect skyrocketing rent and cost of living, which have forced some GSOs to sleep in their cars. Workers want their base wage raised from \$50,925 to \$61,000 a year.

The unions have so far contained industrial action to sporadic and brief stoppages, but have hinted at the possibility of a three-day strike early next year.

New Zealand secondary school teachers reject pay offer, vote to strike

High school teachers across New Zealand have voted to strike after rejecting a Ministry of Education pay offer. More than 20,000 members of the Post Primary Teachers Association (PPTA) held a series of regional stop-work meetings over the past week.

A one-day strike, proposed by the union, will be held during the first term of 2023. Teachers also voted to implement a ban on relief teaching for classes within their schools from the beginning of the school year.

The government offer, which covers teachers in secondary and area schools as well as principals, is for \$4,000 in the first year after settlement and \$2,000 in the second. For most teachers that represents increases of 4.4 percent and then 2.1 percent—a combined increase of just 6.7 percent, well below the projected increases in the cost of living.

PPTA president Melanie Webber described the offer as “extremely disappointing” and said she was hoping the government would improve it before the next school year begins.

Primary school teachers have also overwhelmingly rejected a similar offer but their union, the NZ Educational Institute (NZEI), has not announced any strike action. Both unions are clearly seeking to reach settlement deals to prevent a potentially explosive united mobilisation of workers against the Labour government in an election year.

New Zealand firefighters’ union settles 18-month pay dispute

The New Zealand Professional Firefighters Union (NZPFU) and Fire and Emergency New Zealand (FENZ) have agreed to a contract settlement, subject to a membership vote at coming ratification meetings, after months of strikes over pay and workload issues. The deal, which the union is recommending, covers 2,000 firefighters and support workers.

Strikes were called off in November after the government stepped into the negotiations, offering financial assistance. The overall cost of the offer is expected to be around \$145 million, which is \$100m higher than an offer rejected in July, triggering two one-hour national strikes. The total figure includes \$75.4m in “repayable” funding from the government.

The settlement includes wage increases of 24 percent over three years

and screening for early detection of cancer. The wage rise is backdated to 2021, as is as a 22 percent increase in allowances. There is also a new psychological support and supervision programme, a \$1,500 sign-on bonus to be paid over Christmas and recognition of the cost of living in Auckland with a one-off payment.

The proposed deal works out as 8 percent a year for 2021-2023, barely above the official inflation rate of 7.2 percent, and will do nothing to address the major issue of staff shortages.



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