

Workers Struggles: Asia and Australia

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

Public sector insurance employees hold demonstrations across India

Several thousand public sector insurance workers and officers across India protested outside their offices on December 21 in opposition to restructuring and the linking of wages to key performance indicators (KPIs).

Denouncing the Department of Financial Service and the General Insurance Association of India, they called for the merger of all four public sector insurance companies. The workers also demanded an increase in the family pension to 30 percent and for the employer contribution to the National Pension System (NPS) to rise to 14 percent.

The Joint Forum of Trade Unions (JFTU) has called a strike on January 4, 2023.

India: Workers protest closure of West Bengal tea plantations

More than 500 tea plantation workers in Cooch Behar district, West Bengal, are out of work following the sudden closure of the Sreebas tea estate in on December 22. Workers at the Changrabandha estate only learned of the closure when they arrived for work in the morning.

Since the lockout, workers have protested outside the plantation, demanding it be immediately reopened, before the tea bushes dry up. Management has not paid workers' wages this month, while some staff have not

been paid for last month either.

Workers have appealed to the state government administration to intervene and reopen the estate.

Bamandanga tea estate in Nagrakata, Jalpaiguri district was also closed without notice on December 27, resulting in the loss of nearly 1,600 jobs. Only after arriving at work and finding the gate locked did workers learn that managerial staff had vacated the premises the previous day.

Australian Apple retail workers strike

Around 200 of Apple's almost 4,000 retail workers across Australia went on strike for 24 hours on December 24, with the largest stoppages at the company's Adelaide, Brisbane and Newcastle stores. The strike is the fourth stoppage by Apple workers since October.

The industrial action began after workers rejected a proposed enterprise agreement (EA) from the company that would cut real wages. Apple is offering a pay "rise" of just 2.8 percent in the first year and 2.6 percent subsequently, far short of the current inflation rate of 7.3 percent. Under the company's proposal, this pittance would only be paid to workers who are currently earning the minimum rate for their wage classification.

Workers are demanding pay rises equal to the annual increase in the consumer price index plus 2.5 percent, as well as improved weekend and overtime penalty rates and increased annual and personal leave.

Under the current EA, which is still in effect although it expired in July 2018, all Apple workers can be rostered on any shift, seven days a week and the roster can be changed without notice. Part-time workers have no guaranteed minimum hours, meaning they are

effectively employed as casuals, but are not paid the 25 percent loading required under the retail award. Apple is proposing to guarantee part-timers 19 hours' work per week, but will only provide three days' notice of roster changes.

While three unions, the Retail and Fast Food Workers Union (RAFFWU), Australian Services Union (ASU) and the Shop Distributive and Allied Employees Association (SDA), have members at Apple, the ASU and SDA have not called for industrial action, meaning only workers covered by the RAFFWU can legally take part in the strikes.

While the RAFFWU positions itself as a "militant" alternative to the larger unions, its purpose is to keep workers tied to the unions and the enterprise bargaining system, which have played the critical role in driving down wages and conditions over the past four decades.

Maintenance workers stop work at Western Australia's South 32 alumina refinery

More than 100 maintenance workers at South 32's Worsley Alumina refinery in Western Australia walked off the job on December 20 as part of an enterprise agreement dispute with their employer.

The workers voted in early December to approve industrial action including indefinite strikes, after negotiations between the Australian Manufacturing Workers' Union (AMWU) broke down.

The AMWU says South 32 is refusing to negotiate on demands including wage rises linked to inflation, pay equity with other workers in the industry, and changes to shift and roster provisions. According to the union, the company is also preventing new workers from joining the Worsley benefits scheme, which includes 16.5 percent superannuation, private health insurance and subsidised bank loans.

The striking workers were joined by more than 100 members of the Electrical Trades Union, who have been carrying out industrial action at the plant for six months, including a strike in October over similar demands. The ETU is also seeking to negotiate a union-management enterprise agreement to replace non-union "common law" agreements currently covering the

workers.

Adelaide bus drivers commence industrial action

More than 500 bus drivers in Adelaide, South Australia began industrial action on December 24, as part of a dispute over a new enterprise agreement with Torrens Transit, the city's largest private bus company.

Drivers are opposing the continuation of the dire working conditions they currently face, including falling wages and the lack of work-life balance, as well as increasing safety concerns. In the past two weeks, six drivers have been punched, spat on and attacked with weapons, according to the Transport Workers Union (TWU).

While 75 percent of Torrens drivers voted in favour of strikes of up to 24 hours, the TWU bureaucracy has so far limited the action to a ban on wearing company uniforms.

TWU SA/NT Branch Secretary Ian Smith told Adelaide's "10 News First" last week that the current situation was the result of twenty years of privatisation. But he made no mention of the role of unions around the country in facilitating the sell-off of almost all forms of public transport, and enforcing the slashing of wages and conditions through successive enterprise agreements brokered with management behind closed doors.



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