

# 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.*

## India: Thousands of Karnataka garment workers protest low wages

Over 400,000 garment workers across Karnataka have begun a protest campaign to demand a pay increase in line with the state government's February 22, 2018 draft notification. The Garments and Textile Workers Union has limited its campaign to members sending hand-written postcards to the state's chief minister about their working conditions. The union has threatened to call strike action if wages are not increased soon.

According to the government's draft order, unskilled workers' wages were to be lifted to around 13,800 rupees (\$US169) per month, including a dearness allowance. Garment workers currently receive a meagre 10,441 rupees (\$US128.42) monthly, including the dearness allowance.

In 2017–2018, the then-Congress government in Karnataka revised minimum wages in more than 30 industries but withdrew its draft order following industry owners' opposition. The unions challenged the withdrawal of the minimum wage rise in the High Court, which ruled in their favour. While the affected industries appealed the verdict in the Supreme Court, their petition was dismissed. They have now filed a review petition, further delaying the minimum pay rise.

## Mysore university hostel cleaning workers strike for minimum wage

Hostel cleaners, cooks and laundry workers at the University of Mysore began an indefinite strike on Thursday and picketed the university's entrance. They were demanding the minimum wages in line with state labour laws, and payment of pension benefits and state medical insurance benefits, such as Provident Fund and Employee State Insurance.

The workers are members of the State Combined University Cleaning Staff Association which is affiliated to the All India United Trade Union Centre (AIUTUC) of the Socialist Unity Centre of India (SUCI) party. The union called for wages to be directly deposited into workers' bank accounts, payment of minimum salary arrears and wages to be regularly revised.

## Punjab state road transport workers protest delayed wages and pensions

Punjab Road Transport Corporation (PRTC) workers walked out on strike and protested at the Patiala bus stand on Tuesday to demand payment of delayed wages and pensions. Workers said that PRTC

management had failed to release the 900 million rupees (\$US11 million) required to pay wages and pensions. The workers are members of the Patiala and East Punjab States Union.

Last October PRTC contract workers held a four-hour protest at the Patiala bus stand to demand three months' unpaid wages. The PRTC and Punjab Contractual Workers Union also demanded that the ruling Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) keep its pre-election promise to regularise wages, end outsourcing and convert contract workers into permanent employees.

## Punjab water utility contract workers demand permanent jobs

Contract workers from the Punjab Water Supply and Sanitation Department marched to AAP parliamentarian Dr Kashmir Singh's office in Tarn Taran on January 7 to demand permanent jobs. Jal (water) Supply and Sanitation Contract Workers' Union members from adjacent towns, such as Chohla Sahib, Khadoor Sahib and Naushehra Pannuan, participated in this protest.

A union spokesperson said the workers had been employed as contract workers for 12 years but were still on contracts and receiving meagre wages. The union demanded permanent jobs for all contract and outsourced workers.

## Visakhapatnam municipal water utility workers strike in Andhra Pradesh

Water supply and sanitation workers from the Greater Visakhapatnam Municipal Corporation (GVMC) walked out on January 9, accusing the corporation of not implementing a March 2022 agreement to resolve pay and welfare issues. Workers cut off the water supplies to the homes of the mayor and the municipal commissioner and to other parts of the city.

Workers demanded a pay rise and the filling of vacancies of deceased workers. They said they were only paid 13,000 rupees (\$US159) per month while the state minimum wage was 21,500 for skilled workers and 18,000 rupees for unskilled workers.

GVMC officials met with the workers at midday. Workers agreed to end the strike after corporation officials issued a vague written commitment to "discuss the issues with the commissioner and solve them." The strike was under the control of the Centre for Indian Trade Unions.

## Orissa government demolishes alleged sex workers homes

Families of fifteen alleged sex workers in the city of Bhubaneswar protested against the demolition of their homes by state authorities on

January 7. The houses were jointly destroyed by the Bhubaneswar Development Authority, Bhubaneswar Municipality, National Highway Authority of India (NHAI) and the state police, claiming they were “illegal settlements.”

The residents said they had been living in the houses legally and receiving the government entitlements. Protesters demanded the government restore their homes as soon as possible.

### **Sri Lankan public sector workers protest rising cost of living**

Hundreds of Ceylon Electricity Board’s Joint Trade Union Alliance members held a lunchtime protest on Tuesday outside the Ceylon Electricity Board’s headquarters over electricity tariff increases.

Workers oppose the Wickremasinghe government’s approval of further electricity tariff increases of 65 percent from January 1, followed by a 75 percent increase in August. Workers also protested in Matara and Galle, two major southern province cities, chanting slogans: “Stop cutting taxes from salaries”, “Provide relief to people” and “Uninterrupted electricity supply.”

On the same day, Ratmalana railway services yard workers demonstrated to demand 168 substitute and casual workers be made permanent.

On Wednesday, health workers at Kurunegala and Galle (Karapitiya) government hospitals demonstrated outside their respective hospitals to demand higher wages in response to rising inflation and for a halt to increases in bank loan interest rates.

### **Myanmar: Sacked footwear factory workers reject company reinstatement offer**

Twenty sacked workers from the Myanmar Pou Chen footwear plant in Yangon’s Shwepyitha Township have rejected a factory management offer of reinstatement. The workers, who were sacked two months earlier for organising and participating in a strike, said the offer required them to drop previous demands for improved conditions and to refrain from future protests. The company produces shoes for Adidas.

The 20 workers, who were mostly union members, said management had only offered to compensate them for the time they were laid off. Seventeen declined the management offer while three accepted the offer for compensation before resigning.

More than 2,000 of the 7,800 workers at the factory went on strike in late October last year with several demands. These included the minimum daily wage be raised from 4,800 kyats (\$US2.27) to 8,000 kyats (\$3.78) to account for rising food prices, paid overtime, guaranteed days off, and manageable production targets.

### **South32 alumina refinery maintenance workers in Western Australia strike again**

Over 100 Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) members from South32’s Worsley alumina refinery in Western Australia walked off the job for the second time in as many weeks on Tuesday to demand an enterprise agreement that replaces non-union “common law” contracts.

AMWU members previously walked out in December, following strikes and ongoing industrial action by Electrical Trades Union (ETU) members in July and October. ETU members are also fighting to replace their common law contracts with a union negotiated enterprise agreement. Up to 260 ETU members, including electricians, mechanical trades and trades assistants are involved in the dispute. The ETU has been trying to stitch up a deal with South32 since January last year.

The AMWU says South 32 is refusing to negotiate on other demands. These include 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. South32 wants a four-year agreement. The unions want a deal on a two-year agreement.

### **Port workers at Kwinana grain terminal strike**

Over 70 workers from the CBH Kwinana grain terminal at Port Fremantle in Perth, Western Australia, walked off the job for 24 hours on Thursday and plan to strike for 24 hours on Saturday. The workers are members of the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) which has drawn out the dispute with low-level work bans implemented in October in their dispute with CBH (Co-operative Bulk Handling) for a new enterprise agreement. The union is demanding wage increases indexed to the consumer price index (CPI), which is over 7 percent in Perth.

CBH Group is a grain growers’ co-operative that handles, markets and processes grain from the wheat belt of Western Australia. In December 2022 it reported a net profit after tax of \$497.7 million. Workers condemned the CBH Group board of directors who they claim awarded itself wage increases in the vicinity of 10 percent per year over the next two years.



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