

# 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: Part-time public-school teachers in Kerala protest low wages

Around 1,500 part-time public-school teachers rallied outside their union office, the Samagra Shiksha Kerala (SSK), in Kerala's capital Thiruvananthapuram, on January 17 to demand a wage increase. The teachers (mostly women) accused the government of having no concern for their plight and threatened indefinite protests if government officials continued to ignore them.

The teachers are employed through the Block Resource Centres to give lessons in music, physical education and drawing. While they were recruited in 2016 on an initial monthly salary of 29,000 rupees (\$US356) this was gradually reduced and is now only 10,000 rupees. In July 2021, their salaries were cut to a meagre 5,900 rupees per month. After teachers protested, their salaries were temporarily raised to 14,000 rupees when schools reopened during the COVID-19 pandemic in November 2021.

Teachers allege that although they are part-time, their work is full time and on some days they have to take classes without any breaks. The SSK claimed that it has appealed to the government, which then made false promises about resolving the issue.

## Punjab government contract pharmacists protest low pay and demand permanency

Several hundred Punjab state government contract pharmacists, working under the Rural Development in Panchayat Department, held demonstrations in various cities across the state on Wednesday to demand permanent jobs on full pay scales. A large gathering of pharmacists scuffled with police who tried to break up their protest outside the Punjab chief minister's office in Sangrur.

The pharmacists were recruited on contract in 2006 as Rural Health Pharmacy Officers on low pay. Their current monthly salary is 11,000 rupees (\$US135) with class IV workers getting a miserable 6,000 rupees a month.

They alleged that all state governments since 2006, including the current Aam Admi Party (AAP) regime, had done nothing to improve their conditions. They decided to boycott duties at Aam Aadmi Clinics which the government had planned to inaugurate on Friday. They have threatened to intensify their protests.

## Madhya Pradesh childcare workers demand permanent jobs

About 2,000 anganwadi (childcare) workers and assistants went on strike in Madhya Pradesh on Monday demanding permanent status, an increase in monthly remunerations and payment of their gratuity. Workers said that apart from their day-to-day work, they do a lot of survey work and other additional work. They are paid just 10,000 rupees (\$US123) a month, and assistants 5,000 rupees.

Workers want anganwadi pay lifted to 18,000 rupees until they are given permanent status. Another demand is for a pension after retirement. The government has refused to lift anganwadi pay but instead offered to provide a smart phone for every worker to monitor their work.

## Bangladeshi research institute workers strike over unpaid wages

Daily wage workers at the Bangladesh Sericulture (silk farming) Research and Training Institute in Rajshahi stopped work on January 22 to demand payment of seven months' outstanding pay. They protested at the institute between 11 a.m. and 1 p.m.

One worker said there were 119 employed under various projects at the institute for a daily wage between 550 and 600 taka (\$US5.17 and \$5.64). He claimed that when recruited they were given a written statement saying that they would only be paid if funds were available, and that they could not claim arrears.

Workers have submitted a written application to the institute's upper management demanding their arrears but have received no reply. They warned of a "tougher movement" if their arrears are not soon paid.

## Queensland power station contract workers strike for higher pay

Over 50 maintenance workers employed by contractor Downer DMH Operations at the coal-fired Callide Power Station in Queensland walked off the job and picketed the plant on January 18 to demand higher pay. In November, the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) approved taking protected industrial action, including strikes of up to 24 hours and bans on overtime and callouts.

The AMWU is in dispute with Downer over its proposed enterprise agreement. A union spokesman claimed that when Downer employs other workers to do the same jobs as current Downer employees, they are paid significantly more. AMWU members are demanding equal pay.

## **Navy ship maintenance workers in New South Wales strike for better pay**

About 50 ship maintenance workers at Thales Garden Island, in Sydney Harbour, walked off the job and demonstrated at the facility on January 19 to demand a better offer in Thales' proposed enterprise agreement. Thales is contracted by the Royal Australian Navy to provide dry-dock facilities and maintain and refit its naval fleet.

The workers are members of the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU). According to the union, workers want the Manufacturing Award to underpin the agreement and improve conditions, and a better wage rise offer.

## **Cleanaway truck drivers in Sydney walk off in pay dispute**

Truck drivers at the Cleanaway Operations depot at Hillsdale, an inner-Sydney suburb, stopped work on the morning of January 20 and demonstrated at the depot gate to demand management return to the negotiating table and make an improved enterprise agreement offer. The Transport Workers Union (TWU) said negotiations had broken down with Cleanaway rejecting most of the members' claims, including pay parity with workers at other Cleanaway depots.

The TWU claim that Cleanaway has rejected union recognition, refused to put a consultation clause in the agreement, failed to do a deal on job security and offered pay and conditions that would see workers going backwards. The union said there would be a 24-hour strike on January 27 at three Cleanaway depots—Hillsdale, Erskine Park and Mortdale.

## **InvoCare funeral services workers in Victoria strike**

About 40 workers from funeral services provider InvoCare walked off the job for four hours on January 20 and picketed the company's Le Pine, Glen Waverly office in Melbourne to demand an improved enterprise agreement offer. It was the first time the funeral workers have taken industrial action in 30 years.

Australian Workers Union members want a wage rise that keeps pace with the increasing cost of living and an extra week's leave because they are cyclically rostered to work overtime on weekends. Workers have rejected InvoCare's proposal to introduce a new classification structure, which they say would not pay enough for the assigned work of the planned positions.

InvoCare is an international company listed on the Australian Stock Exchange. It owns Le Pine, White Lady, Simplicity and WD Rose. It has 290 funeral home locations in Australia and the Asia Pacific region employing over 1,800 people.

## **Ship management workers in Western Australia on strike**

On-board ship workers, including cooks, caterers and seafarers from Tidewater Ship Management, began a seven-day strike on Tuesday in their dispute for a new enterprise agreement.

The Maritime Union of Australia members voted unanimously on

December 6 to approve strike action and work bans following a breakdown in agreement negotiations. Workers have been taking limited industrial action since December 19.

## **Australian Services Union accepts three-year wage cut at Glen Eira City Council**

On January 20, the Australian Services Union, representing 169 workers at the Glen Eira City Council (GECC) in Melbourne, announced that it had reached an in-principle agreement with the council on a new enterprise deal. Although the agreement is not finalised, the union told members that their protected action ballot for industrial action has been withdrawn. There was no consultation with members, even though 91 percent of those who participated in the ballot approved of taking action.

The three-year deal, done behind closed doors with the GECC, constitutes a real wage cut. Australia's consumer prices index (CPI) was 7.8 percent for the December quarter, but the union signed off on annual wage increases of only 2.25, 3.25 and 2.75 percent. In real terms workers' wages will have gone backwards by over 15 percent in the next three years.

The ASU held 21 negotiation meetings with GECC since the previous agreement expired on June 30, 2021, which meant that workers had no pay increase for 18 months. The ASU is holding members' meetings next week to push through the new deal.

## **New Zealand teachers begin action over stalled pay talks**

New Zealand secondary school teachers are poised to take industrial action over stalled pay talks. The Post Primary Teachers Association (PPTA) has confirmed that unless there is improvement, union members will refuse to cover for absent colleagues when classes resume next week.

While the limited action is effectively a work-to-rule, about 20,000 teachers voted late last year for a one-day strike early in the first term of 2023.

PPTA president Melanie Webber said the ministry of education's latest offer of two pay rises, a total increase of \$6,000 over two years, was not enough to keep up with inflation. The lump-sum offer, she said, represented a "significant pay cut in real terms."

New Zealand Educational Institute president (NZEI) Mark Potter said primary school teachers would meet in February to consider a revised offer the ministry made in December. It included a \$4,000 pay rise and a further \$2,000 or 3 percent (whichever was higher) from December 2023. Potter said it was up to the union's members to decide whether to accept or reject the revised offer.

In fact, the two unions are keeping the main teacher workforces separate and tied up in limited action as they try to negotiate settlements. In May 2019, 52,000 teachers went on strike. It was the first time primary and secondary teachers had taken strike action together.

## **New Zealand university fined and told to re-start redundancy process**

The NZ Employment Court has fined Auckland University of Technology (AUT) \$3,000 for breaching a compliance order and ordered

it to restart its redundancy processes.

The decision, which has been hailed as a victory by the Tertiary Education Union (TEU), will not stop the looming sackings. The union has refused to organise any action to fight the more than 1,000 sackings imposed on the sector since the COVID pandemic began.

The TEU took AUT to court claiming that the university had repeated conduct the Employment Relations Authority (ERA) previously ruled as a breach of their collective agreement. The TEU argued that the university failed to specifically identify which roles were to be axed.

AUT planned to cut 170 academic staff in a bid to lower costs by \$21 million or more, citing impacts COVID-19 had on central government funding and revenue from international students. The university offered staff the opportunity to apply for voluntary severance, of which 90 accepted, leaving 80 positions to be eliminated. Staff were told on December 1 about the termination of their employment from February 1, 2023.



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