

# 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: West Bengal government workers strike for increased dearness allowance

About one million West Bengal government administrative employees stopped work across the state on February 13 to demand an increase in the dearness allowance (DA). They want it to be the same as Central government employees. Nearly all work at state government offices came to a halt. The strike was called by 33 organisations associated with various political parties and trade unions.

Workers previously held a sit-down demonstration in West Bengal's capital Kolkata in January and on February 8 started a hunger protest. Workers complained that the Mamata Banerjee-led TMC government has ignored their demands.

Workers alleged that the dearness allowance paid by central Indian government was currently 38 percent, following a 4 percent increase on July 2022. They said most of the Indian states pay between 20 and 40 percent of the basic wage. The West Bengal government pays only 3 percent and has not increased the dearness allowance since 2009.

## Tamil Nadu power generating workers strike for permanent jobs

Around 1,300 contract workers from NLC Tamil Nadu Power Limited (NTPL) in Thoothukudi, including engineers, skilled and unskilled workers, have been on strike since February 13 to demand permanent jobs. NTPL is a joint venture company of Neyveli Lignite Corporation India Limited and the Tamil Nadu Generation and Distribution Corporation.

Nearly all these contract workers have been employees at the Thoothukudi power plant for ten years. The workers are also demanding weekly holidays (at present they are not entitled to a holiday), social welfare, overtime payments and implementation of the 2020 tripartite "equal wage for equal work" settlement.

The Union Ministry of Coal owns an 89 percent share in the plant while the Tamil Nadu Electricity Department holds 11 percent. The plant has a workforce of 1,300 of which only 125 are permanent workers. The rest are exploited contract workers who are paid a daily wage of just 450 rupees (\$US5.44).

NLCL ignored a state labour commission order in June 2021 to revise the contract workers' wages. Last year management falsely promised to implement medical coverage for contract workers and their families and

provide bonus and pension fund (EPF) by February 6, 2023. After management failed to deliver on its promises workers decided to go on strike.

## Nepal: Public transport workers protest police bullying and excessive fines

Public transport workers in Kathmandu Valley, Nepal walked out on Tuesday morning over police bullying, excessive fines and parking restrictions imposed by the Kathmandu Metropolitan City. The strike was called by the Nepal Transport Independent Workers' Organisation, Nepal Transport Workers' Association and All Nepal Transport Workers' Association.

Workers accused traffic police of imposing illegal fines, suspending drivers' licences and unnecessarily demanding vehicle pollution tests. Drivers are also opposed to the Kathmandu Metropolitan City banning long and medium route public vehicles parking in open spaces, instead of inside the New Bus Park at Gongabu. Drivers alleged that they had been assaulted by employees of Lhotse Multipurpose, the contractor company hired to operate the New Bus Park.

## Sri Lankan public health workers still protesting over deteriorating services

Hundreds of public health workers from the Kurunegala teaching hospital and Chilaw hospital demonstrated outside their hospitals on Monday and Wednesday in the North-Western province over several demands. These included supplies of essential medicine and hospital equipment, removal of high taxes and lower inflation. Protesters held placards saying "Health Services in disastrous state."

The health unions called the limited and isolated demonstrations in response to the growing anger of health workers who are finding it impossible to survive under the Wickremesinghe government's IMF-dictated austerity program.

Not having any answers to the crisis, union representatives told protesting workers what they already know. That is, there are shortages of 150 essential medicines throughout the country; the government has directed hospital authorities to perform only essential surgeries; people are dying due to non-availability of medicine; funding for medicines has been cut by 50 percent between 2021 and 2022.

On February 9, the Sri Lanka Medical Association told the media that the health system was on the brink of collapse. Workers at the Apescha cancer hospital in Colombo and several other hospitals demonstrated in

front of their respective hospitals over the imminent breakdown of the health sector.

### **Malaysian health workers threaten to strike**

Under pressure from overworked members, the Malaysian Medical Association (MMA) has threatened strike action if the government does not introduce work reforms. MMA President Dr Muruga Raj Rajathurai alleged that the healthcare system and its human resources have been “stretched to its limits” for years.

Apart from the lack of permanent positions to give contract doctors secure employment, Muruga denounced overcrowded public healthcare facilities, manpower shortages, low pay and long hours facing public healthcare workers. He said the MMA was being pressed to take action from frustrated public healthcare workers who have “reached their limit.”

The MMA is the main representative body for all registered medical practitioners in Malaysia, with over 10,000 members. It covers doctors, private and public, specialists and general practitioners, medical officers and house officers, as well as medical students.

### **Cleanaway truck drivers in Sydney strike again in pay dispute**

On Tuesday, for the second time in two weeks, rubbish collection workers at Cleanaway’s Hillsdale depot in eastern Sydney, New South Wales, walked out for 24 hours over the company’s proposed enterprise agreement. Cleanaway is contracted by the City of Sydney to collect and manage kerbside rubbish. Thousands of rubbish bins have not been emptied due to ongoing industrial action.

Tuesday’s strike was called after Cleanaway and Sydney’s Lord Mayor failed to hold talks with the Transport Workers Union (TWU). Workers rejected the company’s pay offer, backdated to July 2022, containing nominal pay rises of 5 percent in each of the first two years and 4 percent in the third and fourth years. Workers want an increase that gives them pay parity with workers at other Cleanaway depots, which the union claims is \$4 per hour higher than what City of Sydney depot workers are paid.

The union claimed that Sydney depots are 30 to 40 percent understaffed, Cleanaway has rejected union recognition, refused to put a consultation clause in the agreement, failed to do a deal on job security and offered below inflation pay and worsening conditions. Cleanaway workers have also carried out strikes in recent weeks at other Sydney depots in Erskine Park and Peakhurst.

### **Sea Life workers walk out for higher pay**

United Workers Union (UWU) members at tourist attraction facilities of Sea Life aquariums in Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland walked off the job last weekend over a proposed enterprise agreement (EA). They protested outside their aquariums in Melbourne, Sydney and the Sunshine-Coast holding placards reading “This deal bites” and “Stop sinking workers’ wages.”

Nearly 100 UWU members across Australia are covered by an enterprise agreement with five employers: Sea Life Sydney Aquarium,

Melbourne Underwater World, Sea Life Sunshine Coast, Otway Fly Treetop Adventures and Lego Land Discovery Centre. Workers at all sites have voted to take further industrial action until they get a “fair” deal.

### **Northern Territory power station workers demand higher pay**

About 200 workers at the state-owned Ron Goodin Power Station at Alice Springs, and the Owen Springs Power Stations, south of Alice Springs, have imposed bans to demand better wages and conditions in a new enterprise agreement.

The Electrical Trades Union (ETU) members have not had a pay increase since their previous agreement ended in July 2021. Wage rises in that agreement were just 2.5 per annum but even these were frozen following a deal between the union and management during the COVID-19 pandemic. In December, workers extended their industrial action by refusing to switch the power stations from more expensive diesel fuel to cheaper gas.

The ETU’s log of claims initially included an above 4 percent pay rise, a 36-hour week, annual leave extended from five to six weeks, increased staffing and more staff input into management decisions. Territory Generation offered only a 2 percent wage increase, back pay and three days extra leave.

The union has indicated that it was willing to have the extra 3 days leave translated into an added 1 percent pay rise. Even if the union secured a 4 percent pay rise it will not address workers’ cost of living increases while the consumer prices index for Australia is 7.8 percent.

### **Allied health professionals in Tasmania protest excessive workloads and underfunding**

Allied professional health workers plan to demonstrate in Hobart and Launceston on February 23 and 28 respectively to protest extreme workloads and lack of services. The workers are covered by the Health and Community Services Union (HACSU) which said people in need of health services are left waiting—so they become sicker, and their problems become more complex and difficult to manage. It claimed that sometimes people are only seen because their issues have become too acute to ignore.

Responding to pressure from members, the HACSU organised the rallies to make a useless appeal to the Rockliff Liberal government. The short protests will be held at 1 p.m. during the lunch break which will minimise their effect.

### **New Zealand secondary school teachers to strike over pay**

New Zealand secondary school teachers are preparing to strike on March 16 over lack of progress with their collective agreement negotiations. More than 20,000 teachers covered by the Post Primary Teachers Association (PPTA) voted for a day’s strike at stop work meetings last year after rejecting the ministry of education’s pay offer.

Since school started this term PPTA members have conducted a work-to-rule, refusing to give up scheduled marking and planning time to cover classes in need of a reliever.

PPTA acting president Chris Abercrombie said negotiations had

continued since last May, with members calling for salary increases to match inflation, more guidance staff and controls on workload. The ministry's latest offer of two lump-sum pay rises, a total increase of \$6,000 over two years, is not enough to keep up with inflation and for many teachers represents a significant pay cut.

The New Zealand Educational Institute (NZEI), which represents primary school teachers, is due to hold membership meetings 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.

The NZEI has not yet proposed any industrial action. Both unions are keeping the teacher workforces separate and tied up in limited action as they try to negotiate settlements. In May 2019, 52,000 teachers went on strike, the first time primary and secondary teachers had taken strike action together.



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