

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.

Asia

India: Karnataka national health mission workers demand permanent jobs

Contract workers from the state and central government-funded National Health Mission Scheme (NHM) have been protesting for over 15 days in Karnataka's capital, Bengaluru, demanding permanent jobs. Nearly 22,000 NHM contract workers from various associations have established the NHM Union. Workers travelled from across the state to join the protest.

Contract workers are employed in 182 NHM departments as nurses, lab assistants, physicians, psychiatrists, District Leprosy Consultants, dental surgeons, data entry operators and others. The contract workers were recruited through relevant state government medical exams.

NHM workers' salaries are paid by the central and state government in a 60:40 ratio basis. Many of them were recruited in 2007–2008. At the time of recruitment, a nurse's salary was 3,000 rupees monthly and after 15 years it has only increased to 14,000 rupees (\$US170).

Workers alleged that even though they worked hard and continuously during the pandemic, the government gave them only 1,500 rupees more. They said they are determined to continue the protest as they are facing many problems like skyrocketing price hikes and cannot continue to live on such a low salary.

Haryana municipal sanitation workers protest workloads and demand permanency

Sanitation workers from the Gurgaon Municipal Corporation (GMC), near Delhi in Haryana state, protested on February 24 over increased workloads. They demanded permanent jobs and abolition of the contract labour system.

GMC employs 3,187 sanitation workers, of which only 201 are regular employees, along with 330 sewer men. Workers protested that they face an enormous work burden in trying to maintain the large city. Following protests in October 2022, the Haryana government falsely assured them that the workforce would soon be increased.

This year 4,298 sanitation vacancies opened in the state, but none of them were allocated for Gurgaon city. On learning this, workers organised

protests to demand immediate relief. According to Nagar Palika Karmchhari Sangh union the city needs approximately 6,500 sanitation workers and 600 sewer men.

Workers alleged that the contract labour system allowed exploitation, salary payment delays, dismissal of workers without notice and gender discrimination. Workers said they would protest at lunch time every day and if their demands were not met, they would call an indefinite strike.

Bangladeshi silk factory workers demand unpaid wages

Workers from the Rajshahi Silk Factory at Rajshahi city in western Bangladesh have been on strike since February 22 to demand six months' overdue wages. The 37 workers, who are only paid 300 taka (\$US2.90) a day are maintaining a picket outside the factory. The factory has ceased operating but management is refusing to meet with workers.

Bangladeshi hospital doctors hold 24-hour strike

Doctors from private and government hospitals in Khulna district, southwest Bangladesh, struck for 24 hours on Wednesday impacting outpatient and non-emergency services across the district. Doctors were demanding justice for an alleged police assault incident on a physician that occurred on February 25.

The physician is the head of the Burn and Plastic Surgery Department of Shaheed Sheikh Abu Naser Specialised Hospital. He was allegedly assaulted by a patient's relatives and an assistant sub-inspector of police during surgery. The Bangladesh Medical Association is demanding the arrest of the attackers.

Filipino traditional jeepney drivers to hold seven-day strike

About 40,000 traditional jeepney and UV (utility vehicles) driver-owners are expected to join a seven-day strike throughout the Philippines on March 6 in opposition to the government's public utility vehicle (PUV) modernisation program. As well as Manila, regional cities affected by the strike include Calabarzon, Bacolod, Davao, Cagayan de Oro and Bicol.

The government claims the modernisation program is aimed at reducing the number of old polluting PUVs from the streets of the country's high density cities. Drivers and operators are being forced to consolidate into

corporations and cooperatives of no less than 15 vehicles if they want the modernisation deadline extended from June 30 to December 31.

Drivers complained that they are being forced into high debt to afford the modern units which each cost at least 2 million pesos (\$US36,300). A spokesman for the drivers told media, "It is no joke that a driver who spent years abroad just to buy a single unit of traditional jeepney only for it to be banned." Driver-owners want the June 30 modernisation deadline extended for five years.

At least 50,000 traditional jeepneys have yet to comply with the modernisation program.

Australia and New Zealand

Australian Broadcasting Commission journalists to strike for improved pay and conditions

Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC) journalists will walk off the job for 40 minutes on March 7, in their first protected industrial action at the government-funded network in 17 years. Hundreds of journalists met on Wednesday around the country and agreed to the short walk-off after more than 90 percent of the 820 Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA) members who voted in a protected action ballot approved taking industrial action. Future action could include strikes up to 24 hours and various work bans.

Over 1,000 members of the MEAA and the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) are in dispute with the ABC over its proposed enterprise agreement. In November, 72.8 percent of the public broadcaster's total staff of around 3,900 voted against a management pay offer which workers said was "insulting." The proposed three-year agreement contained nominal wage increases of just 3 percent per annum, far short of the current rate of inflation at 7.8 percent. The unions are calling for 6 percent annual pay increases—still a real pay cut.

Management has made a revised below-inflation offer that contains a 4 percent increase in the first year, 3.5 percent in the second and 3 percent in the third, as well as a one-off payment of \$1,500. The CPSU, whose ABC members are currently voting in a protected action ballot, claimed that the offer will leave their members worse off in year one than the offer that was voted down late last year. The union said the new offer of a \$1,500 sign-on payment fails to offset the exclusion of back pay, and results in a real offer of just 2.3 percent in the first year.

The unions have also advanced demands for "improved" progression through salary bands, a review of "heavy, excessive or unsafe" workloads, changes to overtime payments, as well as rostering improvements.

The CPSU and MEAA have dragged out the dispute with toothless appeals to politicians to reverse their slashing of funding to the ABC. The 40-minute strike will have a limited effect and falls far short of the longer duration strikes of up to 24 hours that workers voted for.

Alcoa smelter workers in Victoria strike for higher pay

This week, 40 key workers from Alcoa's Portland aluminium smelter in Victoria began four days of rolling stoppages in support of their wage and conditions claims in a new enterprise agreement. The Electrical Trades Union (ETU) and the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) members near unanimously voted in November for industrial action, after

rejecting Alcoa's sub-inflation pay rise offer.

Alcoa's pay offer was only an 11 percent increase over the term of the three-year agreement, well below the consumer prices index (CPI) of 7.8 percent per year. Workers want pay parity with Alcoa's Western Australian employees who got a marginally higher but still sub-inflationary 14 percent wage rise last month and who have a 36-hour week. Portland workers have not had a pay rise since their current agreement expired in October 2021.

Alcoa is a transnational mining and aluminium processing company headquartered in the US. Revenue in 2021 was more than \$12 billion. In Australia Alcoa operates bauxite mines, alumina refineries and aluminium smelters. Its Portland smelter employs around 500 permanent workers and 150 contract workers.

MMA marine services workers in Western Australia strike for better agreement

About 70 members of the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA), a division of the Construction Forestry Maritime Mining and Energy Union, employed by maritime shipping services operator MMA, stopped work for 40 hours on February 23 in their dispute over MMA's proposed enterprise agreement. MMA vessels provide services for Western Australia's offshore oil and gas production installations.

After negotiations stalled in November, the MUA applied to the Fair Work Commission for a protected industrial action ballot. On January 9, of the 60 members who participated in the ballot, 59 endorsed taking strike action.

While the MUA claimed that it has made some progress in reaching agreement on conditions, it has not disclosed what wage increase it is seeking.

Auckland University staff strike

Academic staff at the University of Auckland, New Zealand's largest, struck for 23 hours on Wednesday and Thursday this week, causing some disruption during the first week of classes. The strike saw a resumption of action over pay that began at the country's eight universities late last year.

According to the Tertiary Education Union (TEU), Auckland is the only university demanding that union members "sell away" important conditions such as long-service leave and retirement gratuity, along with the threat of no pay increase for some, based on an opaque performance pay system.

A TEU statement declared: "Despite the University being well able to afford a real pay rise, the employer has decided to exploit the current cost of living crisis by attempting to push through these changes."

Professional (non-academic) staff at Auckland are also undertaking a ban on working more than the ordinary hours of work defined in the collective agreement. Professional staff are only contracted and paid to work 37.5 hours per week, yet this is rarely adhered to.

The TEU has kept staff at each university isolated and, following a token half-day strike on October 6, has not co-ordinated any more national industrial action. Separate pay increase settlements have been reached at Otago, Canterbury and Victoria University of Wellington, of between 10.1 and 17.9 percent over the term of the contracts. Inflation is currently running at 7.2 percent. The union openly admits the deals leave most academic staff "behind what they deserve."



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