

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

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## Philippines: Jeepney drivers' unions shut down nation-wide strike without resolution

The planned seven-day national strike by traditional jeepney drivers was called off within two days on Tuesday evening, after unions had closed-door talks with the Philippines President Ferdinand Romualdez Marcos Jr. About 100,000 traditional jeepney and UV (utility vehicles) driver-owners struck on Monday in opposition to the government's public utility vehicle (PUV) modernisation program.

The government claims the modernisation program is aimed at reducing the number of old polluting PUVs from high-density cities. 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 driver told media that on average he brings home \$US3.60 a day after expenses, not nearly enough to save for modernisation and which, he said, will "bury us in debt."

Lacking any immediate alternative to maintain mass public transport during the strike, Marcos was forced to call in the unions to put an end to the strike which had crippled nearly 90 percent of PUV services across the country. Transport unions—Piston and Manibela—called off the strike claiming that Marcos had said he would instruct agencies to "reconsider" proposals amid concerns about the effect on drivers' livelihoods.

Drivers and operators are being forced to consolidate into corporations and cooperatives of no less than 15 vehicles in order to extend the modernisation deadline from June 30 to December 31. Driver-owners want the June 30 modernisation deadline extended for five years.

## India: Karnataka public transport workers demand promised wage rise

Several hundred members of the Karnataka State Road Transport Employees Association have been holding daily protests in

Bengaluru since March 1, demanding implementation of the sixth pay commission recommendations.

The workers called off a strike in 2020 when the government gave an assurance that salaries would be increased in line with the sixth pay commission. But the government later withdrew the commitment using the excuse of the COVID-19 pandemic. Workers claimed that even though there are no contract labourers in the transport department, the government does not consider them government employees.

They accused the government of attempting to systematically abolish jobs by introducing electric buses. In 2021, the Karnataka government contracted Tata Motor for 921 electric buses, which it will maintain for 12 years. Drivers are to be outsourced and only conductors will be employees of the transport department. Drivers said this is how the government would slash jobs and privatise the transport system.

## Punjab university workers demand pay increase

Workers from the Punjab Agricultural University and the Guru Angad Dev Veterinary and Animal Sciences University, in Ludhiana district, have been holding sit-down protests at the universities since the second week in February to demand pay increases. Classes and research have been severely disrupted.

Punjab Agricultural University Teacher Association (PAUTA) is demanding implementation of the sixth pay commission for non-teaching staff and the seventh pay commission for teachers. PAUTA pointed out that the seventh pay commission is already applied at other university colleges in Punjab.

Workers said they will continue daily sit-down protests (dharnas) and have threatened to strike if their grievance are not resolved soon.

## Sri Lanka: Public health sector workers protest unbearable living conditions

Tens of thousands of junior health workers and other health professionals in hospitals across the island struck for 24 hours

from 6.30 a.m. on Wednesday over multiple demands. These included an end to pharmaceutical drug shortages, reversal of 15 percent allowances and overtime pay cuts, a stop to higher bank interest rates and the ever-increasing cost of living.

Workers allege that their workloads have increased unprecedentedly because of staff shortages caused by the Wickremesinghe government's early retirement policy.

### **Aircraft refuellers at Melbourne airport strike for pay rise**

Over 40 aircraft refuellers at Melbourne Airport (Tullamarine) employed by contractor Rivet Energy Aviation walked off the job for 24 hours at 4 a.m. on Wednesday to demand improved wages and better conditions in a new enterprise agreement. The strike forced Qantas and freight companies Australia Air and DHL to make alternative arrangements.

The workers are members of the Transport Workers Union (TWU), which had been in award negotiations with Rivet for over a year. Rivet made two sub-inflation pay offers which workers rejected. The TWU is prepared to accept 4 percent annual pay rises, which compared to the 7.8 percent official inflation rate is a real pay cut. The workers' have not had a pay increase since May 2020.

The TWU is making useless appeals to Qantas to "intervene" and pressure Rivet "to engage in discussions with its workers."

Rivet Energy Aviation is part of the multi-national conglomerate Rivet Group, which includes mining and trucking. It also provides refuelling services at Adelaide Airport in South Australia. Customers include Qantas, DHL, Cathay Pacific, Singapore Airlines, Fiji Airways and Qatar Airways.

### **St John Ambulance workers in Victoria take industrial action for higher pay**

Over 100 St John Ambulance workers began state-wide industrial action on Monday to demand an improved enterprise agreement pay offer from St John. The Victorian Ambulance Union (VAU) said 16 months of negotiations had stalled with St John offering a "pathetic" pay rise of only \$0.14 per hour for Patient Transfer Officers.

The union has limited industrial action. This includes ambulance crew returning to their home station for meal breaks, stopping work to write liquid chalk signage on ambulances, not commencing work before the rostered starting time and not working past the end of a shift, and a ban on working "on-call" shifts.

It is the first time St John Ambulance workers in Victoria have taken industrial action.

### **Dynelec workers in New South Wales strike for pay rise**

Electricians from the Dynelec electrical engineering factory at Unanderra, a suburb of Wollongong south of Sydney, walked off the job in two four-hour strikes last week and picketed the factory as part of protected industrial action over Dynelec's proposed enterprise agreement. The ten Electrical Trades Union members voted in January to take industrial action after rejecting the company's proposed non-union negotiated agreement.

### **New Zealand primary teachers reject pay offer, vote on strike action**

Around 30,000 New Zealand primary and area school teachers have overwhelmingly rejected the latest pay offer from the Ministry of Education and have been voting on industrial action, with a strike scheduled for March 16.

Tens of thousands of teachers voted at recent meetings across the country held by the primary teachers' union, the NZ Educational Institute (NZEI). A revised offer the ministry made in December, which was rejected, included a \$4,000 pay rise and a further \$2,000 or 3 percent (whichever was higher) from December 2023.

"The depth of feeling among members was incredibly strong across all parts of the sector," said NZEI President Mark Potter. The rising cost of living remained an issue for many in New Zealand, he said. He then added; "I'm sure our members will be making their voices and opinions heard from now until the general election."

Given that NZEI is a major supporter of the Labour government, which has imposed a public sector "pay restraint" policy, this is highly ingenuous.

Secondary school teachers earlier rejected a pay offer of two lump-sum rises of a total increase of \$6,000 over two years, well below inflation. Since school started this term, members of the Post Primary Teachers Association (PPTA) have conducted a work-to-rule, refusing to give up scheduled marking and planning time to cover classes in need of a reliever.

The PPTA has already called a one-day strike for March 16. Should primary teachers vote to go out, as is likely, they will join. 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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