

# Workers Struggles: Asia and Australia

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## **India: West Bengal government workers hold third strike for increased dearness allowance**

About one million West Bengal state government workers struck on March 10 to demand an increased dearness allowance (DA) as per central government employees. The strike was called by the Coordination Committee of state government employees along with Joint Sangrami Manch, an alliance of about 30 state government employees' organisations.

Workers, including teachers and municipal employees, ignored threats from the Mamata Benerjee-led Trinamool Congress (TMC) government that the strike would be treated as a break in their service and they would face other disciplinary action. District secretariat employees and teachers of most of the schools and colleges protested at their work sites and chanted slogans demanding a DA increase. Nearly all government services ceased during the strike.

The action followed a two-day strike on February 20 by administrative workers, a one-day strike on February 13, a sit-down demonstration in Kolkata in January, and a hunger protest on February 8.

Workers alleged that the dearness allowance paid by the central Indian government is currently 38 percent and most of the Indian states pay between 20 and 40 percent of the basic wage. The West Bengal government only pays 3 percent and has not increased the allowance since 2009. Last month the West Bengal government's state budget indicated that it will not increase the allowance.

Employees' associations filed a legal case against the state government in the Calcutta High Court. It ruled against the government's refusal to pay the higher DA but the case is now in the Supreme Court. Workers said they are behind by about 12,000 rupees (\$US145) to 18,000 a month.

## **Nagaland government workers demand restoration of previous pension scheme**

Nagaland state government workers marched in Kohima, Nagaland's capital, on Tuesday demanding restoration of the Old Pension Scheme (OPS). The demonstration was part of a national protest by public sector workers demanding the scrapping of the new pension scheme (NPS), which was introduced in 2004 by the then BJP-led central government.

Nagaland has nearly 124,000 state government employees. The protest was called by the Confederation of All Nagaland State Service Employees' Association. Protesters held placards that read "Scrap NPS, pension is my right," "NPS is fooling people." Nearly 40,000 Nagaland state employees are under the new scheme.

Public sector workers across India have been holding demonstrations for over a year demanding reinstatement of the old pension scheme which was withdrawn in 2003. The old scheme did not require a 10 percent contribution from employees' salaries and the pension was determined by the employees' final salary. Under the new scheme, the pension is reduced and there is no death benefit.

The All India State Government Employees Federation (AISGEF) and the Central Government Employees & Workers (CGEW) called the national protest with a charter of seven demands. Workers said they will keep protesting until the OPS is restored.

## **Delhi University workers protest private agency recruitment**

Over 1,000 Delhi University workers are maintaining protests begun in mid-February over tenders for the engagement of clerical staff through the Government e-Market (GeM) portal. The portal was set up by the Department of Commerce and Ministry of Commerce and Industry.

Workers fear that it will end job security and deny workers' entitlements like health insurance, pensions and gratuity. They alleged that GeM is designed to hire contract workers through a tender process, meaning that from here on workers will not be recruited directly by the Delhi University but a private entity.

Delhi University has approximately 4,400 employees, including 1,100 contracted staff. A tender has been called to hire 20 clerks, lab attendants and multi-tasking staff from private entities. Workers fear that once they do so the colleges will be asked to hire staff through the GeM portal only.

Workers alleged that if a private recruitment entity is involved with job reservations for marginalised sections, such as scheduled castes, tribes and other oppressed layers, it will collect money in the name of application fees and bribes to place applicants on the pay roll.

## **Offshore helicopter engineers in Western Australia strike**

Offshore helicopter maintenance engineers from CHC Helicopter-Australia at Broome and Karratha in northern Western Australia, walked off the job for 48 hours at noon on Thursday. Over 40 members of the Australian Licenced Aircraft Engineers Association (ALAEA) are in dispute with CHC after twice rejecting its proposed enterprise agreement.

The ALAEA threatened that industrial action will continue until CHC agree to a "real" annual wage increases, a \$10,000 per annum T-Bosiet (basic offshore safety induction and emergency training) allowance and annual leave loading. The union said CHC's pay offer during eight months of negotiations represented a below inflation real pay cut.

The Australian Manufacturing Workers Union, which has eight members at CHC, has not called industrial action even though its members unanimously voted to take strike action.

**Wagga Wagga base hospital nurses in New South Wales protest unsafe staffing**

Nurses and midwives from Wagga Wagga Base Hospital in southern New South Wales, rallied outside the hospital at the end of night shift on March 8 to protest short staffing and safe nurse-to-patient ratios.

A NSW Nurses and Midwives' Association (NSWNMA)-Wagga branch delegate said the loss of experienced nurses and midwives had put considerable strain on an already stretched health system. A recent review of full-time equivalent nursing vacancies revealed that Wagga Wagga Base Hospital is short of 66 nursing positions.

The staffing crisis is spread across the state with regional public hospitals in southern NSW (excluding Wagga) struggling with a nurse and midwife shortage of 28.5, while the equivalent full-time shortfall in Sydney's western suburbs is 457.

The NSWNMA was compelled by its members to call four statewide strikes of public sector nurses in 2022 over low pay and unsafe staffing. The strikes were isolated, with the union issuing useless appeals to the state Liberal-National government to implement safe staffing levels and remove its cap on public sector pay increases.

**Australian Broadcasting Corporation staff to strike for improved pay and conditions**

About 1,700 Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) journalists and other staff covered by the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA) and the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) respectively, plan to strike for two separate hours on March 22. The MEAA and CPSU are attempting to reach a deal with the ABC over its proposed enterprise agreement.

The action is designed to have the minimum effect on television and radio production. Members of both unions will stop work for only one hour at 7 a.m. and again at 3 p.m. The MEAA quickly called off a 40-minute strike planned for March 7 after management made a revised offer.

It included a sub-inflation 11 percent pay increase over three years, backdated to October 1 and a one-off \$1,500 payment (bribe) in the first year, and an expanded gender and diversity pay audit. The offer falls far short of the current inflation rate of 7.8 percent and well below what members are demanding.

The unions claimed they are pushing for 6 percent pay increases, telling members that matching inflation is impossible. Other demands the unions are likely to pare back are an increase in superannuation to 15.4 percent, improved progression through salary bands, a review of "heavy, excessive or unsafe" workloads, changes to overtime payments, as well as rostering improvements.

ABC management has provided the unions with a way to impose a deal that will be far short of members' demands. Management threatened that a higher pay rise would mean more cuts will have to be made elsewhere. The unions, in partnership with ABC management, are attempting to put pressure on the federal political parties to increase the broadcaster's funding.

Australian Paramedics Association (APA)-NSW members have begun industrial action in their long running dispute with New South Wales Ambulance (NSWA) for higher pay and improved conditions. APA members have refused to provide patient billing details between March 13 and 25 and banned transferring non-emergency patients between hospitals. Other action includes chalking union slogans on the side of ambulances and refusing to move from their home station to fill staffing gaps elsewhere.

The action is in parallel, but not combined, with ongoing industrial action by NSW paramedics who are members of the Ambulance Division of the Health Services Union (ADHSU). ADHSU members began a five-week campaign of industrial action in February for a pay increase and to be recognised as professionals. The union claimed that NSW paramedics receive a base salary about \$20,000 a year less than their counterparts in Queensland and Victoria.

ADHSU paramedics are applying similar bans as APA members but also banned its members using their higher-level skills, including administering certain medicines that made them "quasi-doctors."

**Spotless/Downer workers in Queensland hold second strike**

Electrical Trades Union and the Plumbers Union Queensland members at building services contractor Spotless Downer Defence at the Lavarack Barracks and RAAF base in Townsville walked off the job on Tuesday and picketed the facility for an improved pay offer. Workers rejected the company's proposed enterprise agreement, which included a pay increase of only 3 percent.

The action followed an Australia-wide strike by 400 Spotless/Downer workers on February 17 for an improved agreement. The company holds numerous contracts at military bases and other facilities throughout Australia. Each have separate work agreements.

**Ship building and maintenance workers in South Australia strike for higher pay**

Twenty-five members of the Electrical Trades Union at Marine Technicians Australia (MTA) at the Osborne naval ship building yard in Adelaide, South Australia, began a campaign of industrial action on Tuesday. Workers left the job and picketed the facility to demand improved wages and conditions.

In a ballot on December 7, workers voted unanimously for industrial action, which includes a series of stoppages ranging from 1 hour to 7 days, and unlimited bans on overtime. The ETU said members are seeking equal pay with other workers in the same industry.

MTA electrical trades workers service and do other related work on the Australian Navy's SEA1180 Offshore Patrol Vessels.

**Visy workers in Victoria continue rolling stoppages**

Visy Wheeler Street can production workers in Shepparton, Victoria are

continuing rolling strikes begun in January in their dispute over the company's proposed agreement. The Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) members have been out on strike for 17 days since January 18 and walked out again for four days on Monday.

Visy initially offered 2.6 percent per annum wage increases, well below the current inflation rate. Its most recent "improved" offer is for just 8.75 percent over three years or 2.9 percent per annum. The Shepparton workers' last wage increase was in July 2021 and was only 1.5 percent. Workers are demanding a wage rise in line with inflation, which still fails to make up for years of below inflation pay increases.

Visy's Wheeler Street plant manufactures cans for SPC Fruits, Campbell's Soup and Simplot. Workers at these companies said can supplies are running short and at least one is looking for other suppliers to meet demand. The AMWU has isolated the Wheeler Street strike and dragged out the dispute with rolling stoppages and a useless appeal to the local federal MP to intervene.

Visy is Australia's largest privately-owned company with an annual turnover of at least \$7 billion.

These include attempts to scrap or reduce overtime and penalty rates, extend a standard day from 8 hours to 12 hours, and increase rosters to a 7-day period.

Cleanaway drivers in the City of Sydney are currently in a drawn-out dispute over under staffing and low pay. The TWU took the dispute to the Fair Work Commission in late February after four rounds of 24-hour stoppages and with Cleanaway refusing to continue negotiations.

Canberra Cleanaway drivers are insistent that they will not agree to the introduction of compulsory weekend work.



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### **Alcoa smelter workers in Victoria hold second strike for higher wages**

Over 40 maintenance workers from Alcoa's aluminium smelter at Portland, Victoria, walked off the job on March 8 as part of a series of rolling stoppages in their campaign for an improved wages and conditions offer in Alcoa's proposed enterprise agreement. The Electrical Trades Union and the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union members near unanimously voted in November for industrial action, after rejecting Alcoa's sub-inflation pay rise offer.

The company's initial pay offer was an 11 percent increase over the term of the four-year agreement, well below the consumer prices index. Workers want pay parity with Alcoa's Western Australian employees who got a marginally higher but sub-inflationary 14 percent wage rise last month and who have a 36-hour week.

Alcoa's latest pay rise offer was 13 percent over 4 years. If agreed to, workers would be given access to 70 percent (9 percent rise) of the total multi-year wage increase in the first year. Any worker who accepts the 9 percent offer would be left with just 1 percent wage rises in the following years of the agreement.

Over the last ten years the unions have convinced their Portland members to accept low wage increases, and in many cases wage freezes, while telling them that the company was experiencing a "downturn." This left the Portland workers' wages up to \$17,000 a year less than their counterparts in Western Australia.

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.

### **Cleanaway truck drivers in Canberra walk out in pay dispute**

Thirteen members of the Transport Workers Union (TWU) at a Cleanaway waste management depot in Canberra walked off the job on March 10 and picketed the depot. The truck drivers are in dispute with Cleanaway over its proposed enterprise agreement.

The TWU claimed that Cleanaway is attacking wages and conditions.