

Workers Struggles: Asia and Australia

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The World Socialist Web Site invites workers and other readers to contribute to this regular feature.

India: Uttar Pradesh power unions betray 100,000-strong strike

The joint federation of power workers' unions, Vidyut Karmachari Sanyukt Sangharsh Samiti, prematurely shut down a 72-hour strike by over 100,000 Uttar Pradesh power workers on March 19 without resolving any of their members' grievances. The strike was called off after 65 hours despite a growing number of workers expressing their solidarity with the industrial action.

Workers walked out at midnight on March 16 to demand implementation of a December 3 state government agreement to fix pay anomalies and the outsourcing of the operation and maintenance of power sub-stations.

Attempting to cover up its blatant betrayal of the strike, union leader Shailendra Dubey told the media that the government had held "positive" talks with the union. At least 3,000 striking workers were terminated, including 22 charged under the Essential Services Maintenance Act.

Notwithstanding claims of "positive" talks, the union has no written commitment from the government to reinstate the sacked workers or resolve workers' demands. In a slap in the face to power workers, the energy minister thanked the union federation for "understanding the feelings of the government."

Karnataka municipal workers strike against the contract labour system

Over 15,000 sanitation workers from 330 urban municipal bodies across Karnataka stopped work and protested in Bengaluru, the state capital, on March 18 against the contract labour system. They held a two-day strike on February 1 to demand the contract system be abolished and that workers be recruited onto the government's pay roll.

Those striking included loaders, cleaners, helpers, drivers and a large number of sanitation workers. Workers were demanding direct payment and recruitment as permanent employees. Bengaluru workers did not participate in the strike.

Workers said some have been on contract through private companies for 25 years. They said the government directly recruited some sweepers, following protests last year, but the current outsourced workers' employment status remained the same.

Antony Waste Handling Cell, the Mumbai-based contract company, increased its profits in 2021 by 50 percent. Workers alleged that the Karnataka contractor lobby group is close to the BJP government and that it pressures the government to not directly recruit municipal workers.

Guest teachers protest in Delhi demanding job security

Several thousand members of the All India Guest Teachers Association (AIGTA) demonstrated outside the Delhi Legislature on March 21 to demand job security and equal salaries as per regular teachers. Police intervened and forcefully moved protesters to Vikas Bhavan.

The AIGTA said the Delhi government had made false promises over several years that it would meet the teachers' demands. The association alleged that the government issued an order in December 2021 to increase their salary and eight years ago said it would make guest teachers permanent.

MNREGA work scheme employees protest in Delhi

Thousands of daily labourers from several states across India who work under the central government's Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MNREGA) scheme have joined a 100-day protest begun on February 14 at the Jantar Mantar in Delhi. Workers are protesting the government's recent introduction of online attendance and Aadhaar (bio-metric card) based payment.

Workers claimed they are being marked absent due to technical glitches and their wages are being deducted. They complained that mobile communications and insecure internet connections in many rural areas prevent workers from logging in on time. Wages are not directly deposited into bank accounts but paid through the Aadhar-based system which only around 40 percent of workers have.

One worker told the media, "We go to work early in the morning and if the mobile works, the attendance is marked. Many times, after working for the whole day, the attendance does not get marked in the evening, and so we do not get paid," she said.

Workers are demanding timely payment as per the MNREGA Act, which says disbursement of daily wages are to be made on a weekly basis or, in any case, not later than a fortnight. Many workers, however, say they have not been paid in months.

Bangladeshi teachers demand nationalisation of their schools

Bangladesh Teachers Association (BTA) members protested outside the Jatiya Press Club in Dhaka on March 18 to demand their secondary and higher secondary institutions be taken over by the national government.

The teachers are enlisted into the Monthly Pay Order (MPO) scheme and are paid a salary by the government. Their monthly salary ranges between 16,000 taka (\$US150) and 20,000 taka. This is lower than their counterparts at government schools, and that they do not get promotions and other entitlements.

MPO-listed teachers from across the country joined the protest with some who have served for over 20 years.

Sri Lankan communications workers protest privatisation

On Tuesday, hundreds of Sri Lanka Telecom workers protested restructuring and the eventual privatisation of the national telecommunications service provider. The protest was prompted after the Wickremasinghe government announced that Sri Lanka Telecom will be restructured along with Lanka Hospitals in Colombo.

The minister of power and energy told parliament on Tuesday that the restructuring and privatisation of the Ceylon Electricity Board and Ceylon Petroleum Corporation will go ahead and that there will be no reversal of the decision.

Meanwhile, teaching staff at the Jayawardenapura University in Colombo demonstrated in front of the university on Wednesday demanding withdrawal of the Wickramasinghe government's "unreasonable" taxes recently imposed across the island.

Nurses strike at Wollongong private day surgery hospital in New South Wales

About 30 nurses at the privately-owned Wollongong Day Surgery hospital, south of Sydney, walked off the job for four hours on Wednesday over understaffing, forced overtime, inadequate nurse-to-patient ratios and low wages. Nurses picketed the Crown Street facility with several placards, one saying, "Stick your unsafe ratios."

Members of the New South Wales Nurses and Midwives Association (NSWNMA) are in dispute with the facility owner Health Care over its proposed enterprise agreement. Nurses want an improved agreement that includes shift-by-shift nursing ratios for safe patient care, and a "fair" pay offer reflecting rising costs of living.

Negotiations for a new agreement commenced in December 2021. Health Care initially offered 2.5 percent annual increases over four years, which nurses rejected in December 2022. Health Care has refused to negotiate on staffing ratios and this week presented a revised offer that includes just 1.75 percent more in total pay rises across the life of the agreement.

Nurses at private medical facilities in New South Wales are facing similar dangerous workloads and stressful working conditions. Up to 800 NSWNMA members at nine privately owned hospitals in NSW have participated in industrial action ballots with the majority on March 9 voting for strikes. The union has restricted action at these hospitals to wearing union badges, banning overtime, roster changes and non-nursing domestic duties.

Maintenance workers strike again at South32's Worsley alumina refinery in Western Australia

Maintenance workers at South32's Worsley alumina refinery struck for 24 hours on Tuesday after voting down the company's latest proposed non-union endorsed enterprise agreement. The action followed two 24-hour stoppages in January over South32's previous offers. The 132

workers are members of the Australian Manufacturing Workers' Union (AMWU).

The union says South32 is refusing to negotiate on wage rises linked to inflation, pay equity with other workers in the industry, and changes to shift and roster provisions. The company is also refusing to allow new workers to join the Worsley Benefits scheme, which includes 16.5 percent superannuation, private health insurance and subsidised bank loans, and back-pay of wages to when the previous wage review was meant to take place.

Curtin University academics strike in Perth for higher pay

National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) members at the Curtin University in Perth, Western Australia, walked off the job at 2 p.m. on March 14 to demand better wages and conditions. Striking workers voted almost unanimously to hold more strikes if the university fails to improve its offer.

More than 700 NTEU members approved taking industrial action in a ballot in November last year after rejecting the university's offer of 2.2 percent annual pay increases over five years, well below the current inflation rate of 7.8 percent. The NTEU is only demanding a 5 percent increase per annum. Its other demands include cuts to extreme workloads and greater job security, particularly for casual staff.

The NTEU says it now wants ongoing positions and job security for the 5,800 casuals it abandoned in previous agreements at the university. Casuals are currently providing 70 to 80 percent of the teaching in some departments. They have no access to sick leave and are not paid a wage between semesters. Many are paid per assignment, instead of per hour, an arrangement that was costing them thousands of dollars in lost salary annually.

Curtin University posted a \$113 million surplus last year.

Western Australian offshore ship management workers strike

Over 30 workers from offshore ship management companies OSM and Tidewater began a five-day strike on Wednesday for a better enterprise agreement. The workers are members of the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA), a division of the Construction Forestry Maritime Mining and Energy Union.

The MUA accused OSM of attacking current workplace conditions. The union alleges that OSM's proposed agreement waters down current permanency and redundancy provisions, introduces a substandard dispute procedure and aims to move workers to the inferior state workers compensation act.

Dynelec electrical engineering workers in New South Wales strike again for pay rise

Electricians from the Dynelec electrical engineering factory at Unanderra, a suburb of Wollongong south of Sydney, walked off the job at 11 a.m. on March 16 after rejecting Dynelec's revised pay offer in its proposed enterprise agreement. Industrial action by the ten members of the Electrical Trades Union (ETU) included a 24-hour strike in January

followed by two four-hour strikes.

The ETU has been attempting to reach a wage deal with Dynelec since the workers' current non-union negotiated agreement expired in June 2022. Negotiations, which included the NECA NSW, the peak body for electrical contractors, broke down after five months. Negotiations are to resume next week.

Workers want a 36-hour week with a nine-day fortnight, a pay increase that keeps pace with the cost of living, income protection/top up insurance, and union delegate rights such as access to training.

Dynelec is part of the Jones Pickard Group which operates in the mining, utilities and industrial sectors on NSW's east coast.



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