

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: Public sector bank workers protest privatisation and outsourcing

Hundreds of Bank Employees Federation of India (BEFI) members demonstrated in New Delhi on April 4 over privatisation of government-owned banks and related issues. Protesters travelled from West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Tripura. Workers oppose the outsourcing of permanent and contract work, insufficient recruitment levels and want the Old Pension Scheme (OPS) reinstated.

Workers said that government banks are not adequately recruiting which is leading to staff shortages and high workloads. Most new recruitments are on contracts and in the future bank managements plan to recruit “Agnipath Yojana” workers—army soldiers recruited on short-term contract.

BEFI claimed that all government-owned banks have staff shortages and that management are hiring some staff on a 300-rupee (\$US3.60) daily wage and without any social benefits. The federation said two banks have already been targeted for privatisation.

Odisha state contract teachers demand permanent jobs

Thousands of Odisha government school contract teachers demonstrated outside the state assembly in Bhubaneswar this week to protest employment discrimination.

About 20,000 contract teachers were appointed as high school teachers in the state during 2016 and, despite numerous promises from education authorities, have not been made permanent. The teachers said that their colleagues in other districts would participate in the protest, which will continue until their demand for permanency is granted.

Australian building workers protest against repressive industrial laws and for higher pay

Tens of thousands of building workers took to the streets in Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane on Wednesday to demonstrate against Australia’s “anti-union, pro-business” Fair Work Act. They also protested below inflation wage rises, interest rate hikes, sham contracting, wage theft and deteriorating health and safety conditions in the industry.

The rallies followed the recent collapse of several major building companies, leaving thousands of construction workers without jobs and unpaid sub-contractors ruined.

The Construction Forestry Maritime Mining and Energy Union (CFMMEU), Electrical Trades Union and the Plumbers Union called the protest to dissipate workers’ rising anger over the repressive Fair Work Act (FWA) industrial laws, which the Rudd Labor government, in collaboration with these unions, introduced in 2008.

Addressing the protests, union leaders failed to call for abolition of the repressive agency and carefully avoided any mention of their own role as FWA enforcers. Instead they demanded the Fair Work Ombudsman be abolished and it replaced with a building industry watchdog with union representatives. They also called for a reshuffling of Fair Work commissioners and their replacement with high-ranking union bureaucrats.

The CFMMEU donated \$1.9 million to the Labor Party in the lead-up to election of the Albanese Labor government last year. Addressing the Sydney rally, CFMMEU national secretary Christy Cain declared, “They [Labor government] have to understand—where did the money come from to get them elected? If they’re not going to deliver for us, we’re coming for them.”

Cain’s declarations are hot air. The union has no fundamental differences with Labor’s right-wing, pro-business program. The bureaucracy’s preoccupations are to block a political struggle by workers against the government and to strengthen its own position as a state-sanctioned industrial police force.

CHC helicopter maintenance workers in Western Australia hold third strike

Forty aircraft maintenance engineers from CHC Helicopter-Australia at Broome and Karratha in Western Australia walked off the job for 72 hours on Thursday. Australian Licenced Aircraft Engineers Association (ALAEA) members struck for 48 hours last week and 12 hours early in March to demand higher pay.

CHC provides air transport services to the many offshore oil and gas platforms operating along the north coast of Western Australia. The ALAEA is in dispute with CHC after members twice rejected the

company's proposed enterprise agreement, saying it was a real pay cut.

ALAEA threatened that industrial action will continue until CHC agree to a "real" annual wage increase, a \$10,000 per annum T-Bosiet (basic offshore safety induction and emergency training) allowance and annual leave loading.

PPK Mining Equipment workers in New South Wales strike

Close to 70 manufacturing and maintenance workers from PPK Mining Equipment in Newcastle, north of Sydney, walked off the job for 24 hours on Wednesday to demand a pay rise. The workers are members of the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) and the Australia Workers Union (AWU).

These workers have not had a pay increase since 2019 when the unions did a deal with PPK to freeze wages to facilitate a merger with another company, which has been completed. Workers want a pay increase in a new enterprise agreement that compensated for lost wages. PPK increased its revenue by 23 percent last year.

Just before the strike PPK management offered workers an 11 percent pay increase over five years. This was rejected by workers. The unions, however, have not made a specific pay claim. An AWU spokesman told the media that they wanted "sensible negotiations" and to "find a compromise."

Melbourne Zoo workers begin industrial action

Over 160 members of the United Workers Union (UWU) and the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) at Victoria's state-funded Melbourne, Werribee and Healsville zoos began protected industrial action on Good Friday. Workers voted on March 28 to approve industrial action ranging from 20 low-level work bans to unlimited strikes up to 24 hours.

Zoo workers rejected the state Labor government's 3 percent cap on public sector wage rises and its offer of a 0.5 percent lump sum "sign on" bonus, saying it was a real pay cut compared with inflation. Workers pointed out that the unacceptable wage offer followed a series of job cuts and negative changes to their conditions. The last time they took industrial action was in 2008.

State Labor Premier Daniel Andrews declared that his government's wage cap was in response to financial credit agencies' demands and that the policy would not change.

Workers have threatened to continue their action for months if the government does not commit to "good faith" negotiations which began last year.

Devro food workers in New South Wales strike

Over 20 maintenance workers employed by food processor Devro, at Bathurst in New South Wales, walked off the job for 48 hours on

March 30 and protested outside the factory's Kelso plant. Australian Workers Union (AWU) members want higher wages and conditions in a new three-year enterprise agreement. Their current agreement expired in December.

Devro workers have previously had annual pay increases indexed to the consumer prices index (CPI). The union claims that Devro wants to remove this long-standing provision from its proposed new agreement.

Despite CPI being indexed in the last agreement it only delivered small increases of just 0.5 percent in 2020, 2 percent in 2021 and 2.2 percent in 2022. The Australian Bureau of Statistics reported in December 2022 that the CPI average was 7.8 percent. Workers at the Kelso plant are covered by three unions—the AWU, the Australian Meat Industry Employees Union and the Electrical Trades Union.

New Zealand seafarers protest job losses

New Zealand seafarers who lost their jobs with the closure of a coastal shipping service protested outside Port Nelson in the South Island last week.

About 10 Nelson-based seafarers were among up to 60 crew nationwide who lost their jobs after international shipping giant Maersk announced that it was closing its service linking New Zealand ports. It had been operating for less than a year.

Nelson Maritime Union members were joined in Sunday's protest by supporters and other workers. Demonstrators carried placards urging support for coastal shipping and want the Maritime Transport Act to be changed to prioritise New Zealand flagged and crewed ships.

Instead of fighting for jobs and decent conditions and pay for all seafarers, the Maritime Union is pushing a reactionary nationalist agenda and only demanding opportunities for local crews. The union's Nelson branch president, Dean Hogg, claimed Maersk's replacement international service employs cheaper foreign labour. The new service, he said, would take advantage of a rule allowing ships to visit New Zealand ports for up to 28 days before required to employ New Zealand crew.



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