

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: West Bengal state government workers hold another strike for dearness allowance

About 30,000 West Bengal state government workers stopped work on May 4, demonstrating in Kolkata and Howrah to demand the same dearness allowance as central government employees. It was the fourth strike since February. The workers also want all vacant posts to be filled and permanency for casual employees.

While the government issued an administrative order prohibiting the protests, this was successfully challenged in the Calcutta High Court by the unions. A three-man delegation from protesting workers in Howrah was accompanied by police to the state secretariat where they presented their demands to authorities. The protest in Kolkata was monitored by a large contingent of police armed with teargas and water cannon.

The latest action followed a strike of a million state government workers on March 10, a two-day walkout 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. The industrial action has been coordinated by the Joint Sangrami Manch, an alliance of about 30 state government employees' organisations.

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. The West Bengal government's state budget announced in February indicated that it will not increase the allowance. Workers claimed they are behind by about 12,000 rupees (\$US145) to 18,000 a month.

Sri Lankan consumer investigation officers strike after being assaulted

About 100 members of the Consumer Investigation Officers' Association (CAA) demonstrated outside the Colombo head office of the Consumer Affairs Authority on Monday holding placards demanding improved safety for investigation officers and called on the public to reject thuggery.

A CAA spokesman alleged that several of their members were

beaten by a group of armed men when they tried to visit a private farm at Narammala in the North-western Province's Kurunegala District to check whether they had hoarded stocks of eggs. The officers' injuries were severe, and that they had to be hospitalised.

Sri Lankan railway station masters protest over high level appointment

Stations masters at all Sri Lankan railway stations struck for 24 hours on Monday to protest the appointment of an official accused of corruption to the position of Railway General Manager (Commercial). Railway Station Masters' Union members denounced the government for disregarding their continuous objections to the appointment.

Tomago Aluminium maintenance workers in New South Wales strike for higher pay

Over 170 maintenance workers at Tomago Aluminium's smelter in Newcastle, north of Sydney, walked off the job for four hours and protested outside the plant on Wednesday in a pay dispute. The Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) and the Electrical Trades Union (ETU) began negotiations in February with Tomago Aluminium for a new enterprise agreement (EA).

In mid-April AMWU and ETU members voted unanimously to take industrial action after rejecting a company pay rise offer of 11 percent over a two-year agreement. The offer was below the current inflation rate of 7 percent. Gas and other household fuels have increased by 14.3 percent in the past 12 months and education by 9.7 percent. Workers want a pay rise that reflects the increased cost of living, and improved conditions on par with production workers at the plant.

The Tomago plant, which is part-owned by Rio Tinto, is Australia's largest aluminium smelter, producing up to 600,000 tonnes of saleable metal each year.

Tooheys brewery workers in Sydney walk out in pay dispute

United Workers Union (UWU) members from the Tooheys brewery at Lidcombe, a western Sydney suburb, stopped work on May 4 and demonstrated outside the factory with placards stating, "Against cutting workers' wages." The UWU has been trying to negotiate a

new enterprise agreement with Tooheys for the past seven months. Workers rejected a management pay rise offer if they allowed their bonuses to be halved.

Maintenance workers at a liquid natural gas plant in Queensland strike for higher wages

Workers employed by maintenance contractor UGL at the Conoco Phillips Australia Pacific LNG processing site on Curtis Island, 470 kilometres north of Brisbane, demonstrated at the Curtis Island ferry terminal on Tuesday to demand an improved enterprise agreement offer.

One of the claims advanced by Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) and Electrical Trades Union (ETU) members is that their wages include the time spent travelling on the Curtis Island ferry before and after each shift. The unions claimed that for most workers this represents at least 1.5 hours of unpaid travel time per day on the ferry.

Offshore shipping workers in Western Australia strike again

The Maritime Union of Australia (MUA), representing over 70 workers employed by maritime shipping services operators MMA and Solstad, announced this week that their members will strike for ten days, starting 6 a.m. on May 17. The MUA, a division the Construction Forestry Maritime Mining and Energy Union, is in dispute with MMA and Solstad over their proposed enterprise agreements.

The union has been dragging out negotiating with the companies for over six months, telling workers that it was “beginning to see some movement” from the employers. MMA workers struck for 40 hours in February and frustrated Solstad workers struck for five days in March when the union told them that little progress had been made.

Spotless Downer workers in Queensland strike again over low pay offer

Electrical Trades Union and Plumbers Union Queensland members employed by building services contractor Spotless Downer at the Lavarack Barracks and Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) base in Townsville walked off the job on Monday and picketed the facility demanding an improved pay offer.

Workers walked off the job in February and March in opposition to a company pay rise offer of just 3 percent. At least 400 Spotless Downer workers struck at other sites in February after rejecting the pay offer. The company holds numerous contracts at military bases and other facilities throughout Australia. Each have separate work agreements.

Darebin City Council outdoor workers begin industrial action

Over 400 Australian Services Union (ASU) members from the Darebin City Council, in Melbourne’s north, started industrial action on May 2 in opposition to the council’s proposed enterprise agreement. The union claimed the agreement would cut job security, limit wage increases and slash previously hard-won conditions.

Workers have banned litter collection and cleaning streets and parks, ignoring a threat from management that they would be locked out without pay. The ASU has been involved in negotiations since June 2022. The workers’ last pay rise was in July 2021.

While inflation is currently 6.8 percent, the ASU’s wage claim is less than the council’s rate increase cap of 3.5 percent. The union’s claim is for 3 percent or \$45 a week, whichever is higher, in the first year, 3.5 percent or \$45 in the second year and 3.2 percent or \$45 in year three. The union has asked for increased leave entitlements.

Redland City Council outdoor workers strike for improved pay

At least 60 members of the Construction Forestry Maritime Mining and Energy Union (CFMMEU) stopped work and protested outside the Redland City Council office building in the Brisbane metropolitan area on May 5 to demand an improved pay rise in the next enterprise agreement. The workers have only walked out on one other occasion in 27 years.

Workers rejected the council’s sub-inflation pay increase offer of 11.5 percent over three years backdated to July 2022, well below the city’s current inflation rate of 7 percent. Even though the workers have not had a pay rise since July 2021, the CFMMEU has allowed negotiations to drag on for over five months. The union has sought a pay rise of just 13.5 percent over the three-year agreement. To compensate for inflation the workers need at least 21 percent over three years. The council has sought mediation in the Queensland Industrial Relations Commission.



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