

# 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: Tamil Nadu government contract nurses demand permanent status

Hundreds of contract nurses employed by the Tamil Nadu government under the National Health Mission (NHM) held a hunger protest at the Rajarathinam Stadium in Chennai on May 12, International Nurses Day.

The nurses were demanding equal pay for equal work and condemned the government for abolishing paid maternity leave for temporary and contract nurses in November 2022. The government claimed it could not continue to pay maternity leave under its NHM policy.

Nearly 13,000 nurses were recruited in 2015 on contracts stating that they would be made permanent after two years. Only 2,000 were made permanent. Nurses alleged that more than 3,000 government primary healthcare centres are operating without permanent staff.

Protesting nurses demanded immediate appointments and a minimum 18,000-rupee (\$US218) monthly wage, alleging that they are paid below the minimum, despite working more than a 12-hour day.

## Rajasthan childcare workers demand permanency

More than 7,000 Anganwadi (childcare) workers and helpers from 10 districts of Rajasthan state gathered at Bangar Stadium in Pali on May 14 demanding to be made permanent. The workers also protested at Jaisalmer in April for permanency and presented the state government with a charter of five long-pending demands. Many of the workers have served in the job for up to 12 years.

Prior to its election in 2018, the Congress party's election manifesto promised workers in various government departments, including Anganwadi workers, that they would be made permanent.

Apart from permanency, Anganwadi workers want gratuity and a monthly pension after retirement, holidays according to the state health department calendar, a medical allowance and promotions as per service record. The protesters vowed to continue their struggle until their demands are met.

## West Bengal public school teachers protest poverty-level wages

Several hundred para (ad-hoc) public school teachers demonstrated in West Bengal's capital Kolkata on May 13 to demand 100 percent wage increases. Their current meagre monthly wage is 12,000 rupees (\$US145) for secondary teachers and 10,000 rupees (\$US121) for primary teachers.

Teachers marched at Salt Lake and submitted a 13-point charter of demands to the education minister. It included an increase in wages to 30,000 rupees and 26,000 rupees for secondary and primary teachers respectively, a higher gratuity—from 300,000 to one million rupees—and pension for retired teachers. There are over 44,000 para teachers in West Bengal.

## Sri Lankan Inland Revenue Department workers strike over pay cuts

Inland Revenue Department (IRD) workers walked off the job on Wednesday over several demands and in protest against cuts to incentives and their transport allowance.

Workers from IRD's head office and 16 branches joined the strike. Other demands were for resolution of staff shortages and inadequate resources. The workers said they would take further action if there was no immediate response to their demands.

## Cleanaway waste collection workers in Victoria and New South Wales strike

Several hundred Cleanaway waste collection workers in Victoria and New South Wales walked off the job on Wednesday to oppose the company's proposed enterprise agreement.

About 150 workers from depots in Victoria struck for 48 hours impacting on households in the Greater Geelong City Council, Surf Coast Shire and Golden Plains Shire Council areas, and many businesses in Geelong. Cleanaway workers at City of Sydney Council area depots and in Wollongong, south of Sydney, walked out for 24 hours.

The action follows 24-hour stoppages in April by Cleanaway workers in Western Australia, Queensland, the Australian Capital Territory and New South Wales. It is the sixth strike by Sydney Cleanaway workers after they voted in January to begin industrial action.

The Transport Workers Union (TWU) is negotiating for new agreements at Cleanaway depots nationwide. Cleanaway has contracts with 130 local councils and 150,000 business customers across Australia, running 5,000 waste collection trucks. It reported a net profit of \$80.6 million in the 2021–22 financial year and \$49 million after tax in the first six months of this financial year.

Cleanaway's enterprise agreement offers are a direct attack on its

workers' current conditions and pay. If accepted, workers would receive sub-inflation wage rises, roster changes that would cut overtime payments and be forced to work weekends for less pay. According to the TWU, previously agreed quality of life provisions are under attack and health and safety would be reduced.

### **New South Wales paramedics and patient transfer officers impose work bans**

New South Wales Ambulance paramedics and HealthShare patient transport officers united to ban the transport of patients from hospitals to home or to aged care facilities for 24 hours on Thursday.

The workers are members of the Health Services Union (HSU) which has been running a campaign making appeals to the Minns state Labor government to keep an election promise that it would negotiate a lifting of the wage cap on public sector workers. Earlier this month, HSU members at three hospitals in northern NSW walked off the job briefly over the issue.

Under pressure from members at health facilities across the state, the HSU has limited industrial action to short stop-work meetings and minor work bans. Minns has insisted, however, that any increase would only be granted on the basis of "strict economic principles" and "with budget savings and productivity gains." The wage cap limits annual pay increases to only 3 percent at a time when the state's current consumer price index is 7 percent.

### **Onelink warehouse workers in New South Wales strike for better pay**

About 70 United Workers Union (UWU) members from Onelink's distribution centre in Yennora, Western Sydney, struck for 24 hours on Monday to demand improved pay. Onelink provides warehousing and distribution services for NSW Health, delivering medical supplies to hospitals and health services across the state.

The UWU and Onelink have been in negotiations for over four months. With the current cost of living at its highest for over a decade, the union said it was only seeking pay rates and redundancy entitlements that were in line with the rest of the industry. The UWU has persistently accepted below inflation pay increases for warehouse workers over the past decade.

Onelink is owned by the EBOS group, which also has Terry White Chemmart, Pharmacy Choice + and a host of other pharmacies under its banner. Yennora warehouse workers say they are paid \$4 to \$7 an hour less than workers at other EBOS sites.

### **Western Australian firefighters take action over low pay**

About 100 members of the United Professional Firefighters Union of Western Australia (UFUA-WA) implemented work bans on Monday in their dispute with the state Labor government for a new enterprise agreement. Firefighters in acting roles at the Department of Fire and Emergency Services' (FES) Forrestfield training academy closed the academy and returned to their chronically short-staffed stations to do frontline work. It was the first action since 2011.

After six months of negotiations, firefighters rejected the FES sub-

inflation pay rise offer of only 3 percent. The union said the government refused to agree to any of the workers' key log of claims.

The UFUA has restricted its wage claim to only 5 percent annual increases over two years, a real pay cut. Other claims are for annual leave entitlements in line with the rest of the state public service, overtime rates to be paid at 1.5 times ordinary time in the first 3 hours and double time thereafter, a boost to the government's superannuation contribution and an increase in the number of FES firefighters. Western Australia has Australia's lowest number of firefighters per head of population with an estimated shortfall of 700.

Firefighters say they can no longer live the way they used to after 11 interest rate increases by the Australian Reserve Bank. The McGowan state Labor government has capped annual wage rises in the public sector at 3 percent in order to maintain its \$4.2 billion budget surplus for 2022–23, up from \$1.6 billion the previous year.

### **Workers at Whitehorse Manningham Libraries in Victoria reject low wage offer**

Following a month of low level industrial action for higher pay, Australian Services Union members (ASU) at eight Whitehorse Manningham Libraries (WML) stopped work on May 12 and picketed their workplaces. WML libraries are in the local government areas of Manningham City and Whitehorse City, in Melbourne's eastern suburbs.

Workers are opposed to the WML's proposed enterprise agreement which includes an extremely low pay offer of 2.4 percent over two years. The current annual rate of inflation in Melbourne is 6.8 percent, meaning a pay offer in line with inflation needs to be at least 13.6 percent over two years.

### **Maribyrnong City Council workers strike over low pay offer**

On Wednesday, Australian Services Union (ASU) members at Melbourne's Maribyrnong City Council (MCC) held a one-hour stop work meeting and a rally attended by around 100 workers and supporters at Maribyrnong's Central West car park. The workers are in dispute with the council for a new enterprise agreement.

After 12 months of failed negotiations, ASU members rejected MCC's below inflation pay rise offer of 1.75 percent in the first year and 2.45 percent annual increases for the next two years. The council workers have not had a pay rise since their last sub-inflation 2.25 percent increase in July 2021.

The ASU's wage demand is in line with the state Labor policy of keeping public sector wage increases below the 3.5 percent demanded by the Australian Reserve Bank. The union's offer includes sub-inflation pay increases of only 2.25 percent in the first year, 2.95 in the second year and 3.5 in the third year.

### **Transport workers in Sydney protest increasing truck accidents and deaths**

About 100 truck drivers, including Transport Workers Union (TWU) bureaucrats, held a sit-down protest on a major intersection in Sydney's

central business district on Tuesday to highlight the high number of truck drivers who have died on Australian roads in the past seven years. Traffic came to a standstill until police arrived after 15 minutes and the TWU called off the protest.

A union spokesperson claimed 301 drivers, or nearly one truck driver every eight days, have died since 2016. This year 60 people have died in truck crashes, including 17 truck drivers.

The TWU has not organised any concrete nationwide industrial action to force immediate lifesaving changes in the industry. Instead, it has been running publicity stunts that include peak-body road transport organisations and toothless appeals to federal politicians to legislate “transport reform” without affecting the profits of big business.

### **New Zealand regional hospital nurses vote to strike**

Gisborne Hospital nurses on New Zealand’s east coast have voted for limited strike action later this month for better conditions. The one-hour strike will start at 1.30 p.m. on May 24.

Ward 5 nurses say staff shortages have resulted in untenable workloads, burnout and resignations. The New Zealand Nurses Organisation (NZNO) said the employer, Te Whatu Ora Tairāwhiti, has ignored concerns for staff and patient safety.

Nurse Christine Warrander described the current unsafe conditions. “We literally are going home grateful that we have managed to get through the shift without significant harm coming to a patient,” she said, adding “these issues have been present for a while.”

A Provisional Improvement Notice (PIN) was issued in December. Te Whatu Ora said it would meet the PIN’s conditions, including cut bed numbers from 25 to 20 so staff are able to cope. Conditions, however, have only got worse according to Warrander. “We’ve lost more nurses. We’re now going to be probably unable to deal with the workloads anymore,” she said.

This is the first and only stoppage authorised by the NZNO since nationwide protests by thousands of nurses on April 15 over poor conditions and extreme under staffing. The union has refused to organise any ongoing offensive to mobilise nurses across hospitals and to unite with other workers, particularly striking teachers.



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