

# 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: Madhya Pradesh rural health workers end ten-week strike without resolution**

Thousands of Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHA) employed in rural health called off their ten-week-long strike on May 15 without resolving their grievances. At least 25 workers have been terminated, with police lodging action against 10, following a protest at a function attended by the state's chief minister in April.

ASHA workers are only paid 2,000 rupees (\$US24) a month and incentives around 4,000 rupees as per their performance. There are about 48,000 ASHA workers in Madhya Pradesh who have been demanding a wage increase since 2018. They want wages increased to at least 15,000 rupees for supervisors and 10,000 rupees for ASHA workers.

ASHA workers called off a statewide strike in 2021 after the government falsely claimed that their demands would be met. Workers gave the government a month's notice to reinstate terminated workers and to agree to their wage demand or face more strike action.

## **Statewide protests by Haryana municipal workers over long pending grievances**

Several thousand municipal workers in Haryana state demonstrated outside the residences of parliamentarians and ministers in 22 districts on May 17 and 18. Nearly 40,000 workers are in Municipal Corporations, Municipal Councils and Municipal Committees. Their main demands are for contract employees to get equal pay for equal work and for restoration of the old pension system.

They also want safety equipment for sanitation workers, permanent jobs for contracted firepersons, drivers and security workers, as well as reinstatement of retrenched employees, uniform allowances and compensation to employees killed on the job.

Workers ended protests last October after the government accepted most of their demands but did nothing to implement them. The Haryana Municipal Employees Union threatened that if their demands are not met soon, they will organise a bigger rally on May 28 that will include all municipal workers across the state.

## **Bangladesh: Ashulia police attack garment workers protesting**

### **factory closure**

Garment workers from the Fashion Forum Limited Garment factory in Ashulia, Savar sub-district in Dhaka, continued their strike for a second day on Tuesday by blocking the Baipail-Abdullahpur highway. At least ten workers were injured when police were deployed to disperse the protest.

According to workers, factory authorities had declared an indefinite closure of the plant in response to their strike on Monday. Workers said they were provoked into protest after being denied entry to the factory on Tuesday morning. Additional police have been deployed at the factory area.

## **Bangladesh: Sunamganj district commuter transport drivers to strike**

The Sunamganj District Bus, Minibus, and Microbus Workers Union have threatened an indefinite strike on May 29. Sunamganj District is in north-eastern Bangladesh. The union has demanded that the government take steps against police extortion, physical assaults on transport workers and vandalism. They also want all police charges against drivers withdrawn.

The union called off a previously scheduled May 3 strike following a government request. Authorities, however, have not responded to workers' demands, and they then decided on an indefinite walkout.

## **Philippines milk factory locks out workers before announcing redundancies**

Management at the Nestle-owned Wyeth Nutrition dairy processing factory at the Canlubang industrial estate in Laguna, just southeast of the Philippines capital, Manila, locked out production workers on May 18. A spokesperson from the Wyeth Philippines Progressive Workers Union (WPPWU) said they were suddenly barred from entering the plant that morning. They were only allowed to re-enter after being told that 140 workers, including 10 union officers, were being laid off so the company could cut costs.

The WPPWU accused management of trying to weaken the union. Management is refusing to negotiate. The union has filed a notice of strike at the regional National Conciliation and Mediation Board office in Laguna, claiming the layoffs violated a collective bargaining agreement that the union and management signed in December last year.

Nestle reported sales in the Philippines of more than \$US2.8 billion, or

around 160 billion pesos, in its 2022 annual review.

### **South Korean nurses strike after President Yoon blocks demands for improved pay and conditions**

Tens of thousands of nurses went on strike on May 19 after President Yoon Suk Yeol vetoed the Nursing Act which was intended to clarify nurses' roles and responsibilities. The Korean Nurses Association (KNA), which represents over 500,000 licensed nurses nationwide, has been organising protests over several months to overcome opposition to the Act from doctors and other health professionals.

The Nursing Act is separate from the current Medical Services Act, which nurses alleged subordinates them to physicians, and that they are often forced by doctors to perform tasks that go beyond their professional duties because of the ambiguities of the current law, resulting in overwork.

Nurses have long called for a separate nursing law to clearly define staffing levels and duties. Doctors argued that the Nursing Act is an "evil" law that would allow nurses to interfere with their work and cause confusion in hospitals, putting patient safety at risk. The KNA claims that the new law is only aimed at providing a legal basis to improve nurses' working conditions, not at opening the door for them to practice medicine.

The KNA demanded Yoon keep his presidential campaign promise to make a separate law for nurses and vowed to press for enactment of the Nursing Act. KNA announced that nurses will stage a work-to-rule strike and do exactly what is stated in written rules and procedures.

### **Western Australian municipal workers reject pay offer**

About 100 municipal workers from the City of Albany, on the south coast of Western Australia, walked off the job on May 17 after the city's management cancelled their current Certified Agreement. At least 400 workers are left with uncertain pay and conditions. The Australian Services Union (ASU) and city management have been in negotiations since the current agreement expired in June 2022.

At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, the city, in collaboration with the unions, convinced workers to accept a pay freeze and use up 20 percent of their leave within six months, on the basis that the city was going to experience a financial crisis, which proved to be false.

Workers have rejected management's below-inflation pay offer of 6 percent and bonuses in place of restoring entitlements, saying it did not make up for lost pay. The ASU has taken the matter to the Industrial Magistrates Court of WA.

### **Melton City Council workers in Victoria strike for better pay**

Australian Services Union (ASU) members from the Melton City Council (MCC), west of Melbourne, began their second round of industrial action with a 24-hour strike and bans on Thursday. The ASU has notified MCC that members will strike again on May 30 for 24 hours. This campaign follows two weeks of industrial action in February in opposition to the council's proposed enterprise agreement.

The ASU covers 110 administrative workers in planning, bylaws,

animal control, libraries, and schools. Negotiations for a new four-year agreement have been dragging on since June last year when the current agreement expired. The workers have not had a pay rise since July 2021, which was only 2.5 percent, well below the inflation rate at the time of 5.1 percent.

In December, the council made a pay offer of just 2.5 percent annual increases and a \$1,000 sign-on bonus, which was rejected almost unanimously by workers. This represented a major real pay cut when compared to the consumer prices index at the time of 7.8 percent. MCC's trifling \$1,000 sign-on bonus was dismissed by workers as a bribe that came nowhere near compensating for years of below-inflation pay increases.

The ASU is not seeking pay increases to increase members' real wages, but instead, is pushing to do a pay deal that delivers annual sub-inflation increases and do not challenge the state Labor government's 3 percent wage increase cap.

### **Brotherhood of St Laurence workers in Victoria strike**

About 80 Australian Services Union (ASU) members employed by the charity group Brotherhood of St Laurence (BSL) in Victoria held a two-hour stop work meeting on May 16. They are in dispute over the charity's sub-inflation pay offer, which includes annual pay increases of only 5 percent from July 2023, 4 percent in July 2024 and 3 percent in 2025. The current official inflation rate is 6.8 percent.

BSL also wants to change leave entitlements, that would see new employees worse off than the previous enterprise agreement. The new agreement will apply to more than 1,100 workers employed by BSL in its National Disability Insurance Sector, aged care, early childhood health, migrant services, financial education and research and development.

### **UGL workers at a Queensland LNG plant protest again**

Maintenance and construction workers employed by UGL Operations at the Conoco Phillips Australia Pacific LNG processing site on Curtis Island, 470 kilometres north of Brisbane, held their second demonstration in two weeks at the Curtis Island ferry terminal on Tuesday. They are demanding an improved enterprise agreement (EA) offer.

Members of the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union and Electrical Trades Union are demanding that wages in a new agreement 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.

### **Spotless Downer workers in Queensland hold fourth strike in four months**

Electrical Trades Union and Plumbers Union 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 at 2 p.m. on May 18 to demand an improved pay offer in the company's proposed enterprise agreement. Workers held a roadside protest outside the barracks holding signs saying, "Inflation 7.8% Downer

wage offer 3%” and “Downer wages are down at Downer”.

The strike was part of a national campaign by Spotless Downer workers and followed walkouts in February, March and May 8 in opposition to the company’s 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.

### **Port Kembla GrainCorp bulk loading workers strike over stalled wage negotiations**

Ten full-time GrainCorp workers at Port Kembla, south of Sydney, walked off the job on Friday and commenced a week of protected industrial action over stalled negotiations for a new enterprise agreement. The Australian Workers Union has been in negotiations with GrainCorp for a new agreement since December. The current agreement expired in March.

GrainCorp’s port terminal is staffed by a mix of full-time and part-time workers. GrainCorp threatened the part-time workers, who are not members of the ASU, with the sack if they failed to turn up for work during the industrial action. Due to Australia’s draconian industrial laws, workers who are not members of the union are barred from participating in industrial action that has been called by the union.

### **New Zealand teacher unions call off strikes**

New Zealand teacher unions and the Ministry of Education (MoE) struck an agreement this week to put teachers’ strikes “on hold” until May 30. On May 4 secondary school teachers began rolling stoppages in which different year groups were rostered home, with more due this week.

All strike action by both unions has been delayed after a “constructive” meeting was held between Labour’s Education Minister Jan Tinetti, the Post Primary Teachers’ Association (PPTA) and NZ Education Institute (NZEI) on May 20. The unions agreed to suspend any strike notices and further industrial action until next Tuesday.

Primary school teachers had previously rejected the government’s most recent pay offer. Voting on industrial action by NZEI members was then due to close last Monday, but any strike action is now “on hold.” Secondary teachers have also been voting this week whether to strike for the fifth time in as many months.

The unions have been in negotiations with the MoE for a year. Chris Abercrombie, acting president of PPTA, said their latest offer was missing some “really significant things.” The offer included 11–14 percent pay increases but had a 17-month period where teachers wouldn’t see any pay rise, which PPTA declared didn’t “cut it” amid a “significant cost of living crisis.” Teachers haven’t had a pay rise in two years.

The two unions have suppressed any unified fight against the Labour government. On March 16, 50,000 kindergarten, primary and secondary teachers struck together and took to the streets to demand better pay and working conditions. PPTA organised another one-day strike on March 29, which NZEI refused to join. Instead, NZEI recommended the latest below-inflation pay deal which was rejected by its members.

### **NZ health bosses seek to injunct one-hour nurses’ strike**

The New Zealand Employment Court has thrown out a bid by Maori health provider Te Whatu Ora to stop a one-hour strike at Gisborne Hospital’s acute care unit last Wednesday.

Te Whatu Ora’s lawyer claimed the NZ Nurses’ Organisation (NZNO) could not argue the action was about health and safety because there was no immediate threat, as required by law. “Health and safety could not be weaponised to simply put pressure on an employer” the lawyer said.

The NZNO said exhausted nurses are working while sick and injured and live with constant fear of making a fatal mistake. Te Whatu Ora agreed the ward is understaffed and was rostering on locums and working to recruit more nurses. However, the judge noted that “nothing had changed” since Te Whatu Ora accepted a provisional improvement notice requiring legal action last November.

The union complacently declared that the court ruling “upholds the vital right of workers to strike over health and safety concerns.” It is the NZNO, however, following April protests by thousands of nurses over working condition, which suppressed any unified industrial action.



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