

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: Uttar Pradesh government workers protest against new pension scheme

Thousands of public sector employees in India's largest state, Uttar Pradesh, held a protest march in the capital Lucknow on May 26 demanding restoration of the old pension scheme (OPS). Workers complained that the federal government's new pension scheme (NPS), which applies to new recruits after January 1, 2004, severely reduces the pension entitlement to only 10 to 20 percent compared to the old scheme.

Nearly 1.5 million workers have been forced into the NPS. Public sector workers have been protesting for several years over the reduced benefits. Protesters in Lucknow included teachers and workers from health care, public works and courts. Workers came from several districts, subdivisions and rural panchayats (village councils), municipal corporations and other various departments.

More protest marches have been organised to begin in Bundelkhand, Purvanchal and end in Lucknow. Another will pass through Western Uttar Pradesh and Rohilkhand and end at the capital. Organisers said a larger demonstration is to be held in Lucknow on June 21.

West Bengal: Silicosis affected workers and their families protest in Kolkata

Thousands of silicosis affected workers and family members from across West Bengal travelled to the state's capital Kolkata and held a sit-down protest on May 25 demanding assistance and compensation. The workers, suffering from the debilitating and incurable lung disease "silicosis," work at stone crushing plants. Most of the plants are illegal, making it difficult to claim compensation. Many of the workers are "illegal" immigrants and have no access to the limited state health system.

The West Bengal government only provides a one-off compensation payment to silicosis affected workers of 400,000 rupees (\$US4,860) and in the diagnosis period 200,000 rupees. While pensions are available in other states, West Bengal does not have monthly pensions. In order to reduce its compensation payments the state does not test for silicosis and so officially there are only 53 patients in the state.

Protesters called on the government to begin a monthly pension scheme that pays 4,000-rupees (\$US48) to silicosis affected workers and 3,500 rupees to deceased workers' families.

According to scientific estimates there are nearly 10 million silicosis

patients in India. In Rajasthan state, which has over 330 stone quarries, more than 100,000 workers have the disease but only 28,000 are enrolled as silicosis patients.

Sri Lankan teachers ban answer paper evaluations

Over 200 teachers at thirteen centres withdrew from the General Certificate of Education (Advanced Level) answer paper evaluation in Kurunegala (district in North Western Province) on May 29. They accused the government of not paying the answer paper evaluation fees as agreed. A teachers' representative said that the ban will remain until the fees are paid.

Pakistan: Public sector workers in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa demand pay rise

Class IV federal government employees from different parts of Swat district, in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, demonstrated outside the Swat Press Club on May 24, demanding wages be increased by 200 percent. The All Swat Class IV Employees Association organised the protest in response to workers' complaints that food costs have jumped 200 percent along with huge increases in medical costs.

The action followed a workers' protest in Swat district in April in opposition to the newly-introduced pension reforms which cut pensions by 35 percent. The protest was held in front of the Swat Press Club and organised by the All Government Employees Grand Alliance.

Western Australian firefighters protest after rejecting pay offer

About 500 United Professional Firefighters Union members demonstrated outside the Western Australian parliament in Perth on May 25 in opposition to the state Labor government's sub-inflation pay offer. Firefighters dressed in their safety gear yelled slogans like, "Fire and rescue, flames and smoke; your wages policies are a joke."

After six months of negotiations for a new enterprise deal, the union claimed the government has refused to agree to a single one of its five claims. The firefighters have not had a pay rise since 2017.

The union's claims included a 5 percent pay rise; greater employer contributions to their superannuation; a workforce expansion; and a 17.5 percent annual leave loading and overtime rates of time and a half for the

first three hours and double thereafter, in line with other public sector workers.

In November 2022, the state government modified its previous four-year wage cap covering all public sector employees and restricted future pay increases to \$60 per week or three percent per annum (whichever is the greater) and a one-off \$3,000 cost-of-living payment, which will only be given after the union agrees to the government's offer. Firefighters rejected the offer on May 10, describing it as "insulting" and resolved to take industrial action for the first time since 2011.

One worker told the rally the number of professional firefighters had not risen since 2015, meaning that staffing levels are often 10–20 people short at the start of the shift and that firefighters have to work extra shifts to ensure stations are staffed at full capacity. Firefighters vowed to continue their struggle until the Labor government met their demands.

Quantem port terminal workers in Queensland strike

Workers from the Quantem port terminal at Pinkenba, near the Port of Brisbane, walked off the job and picketed outside the facility on May 24. United Workers Union (UWU) members are in dispute with the liquid bulk storage company after rejecting its proposed enterprise agreement. The UWU claimed that Quantem wants to freeze wages for three years and have been dragging out negotiations for almost eight months.

Quantem has bulk liquid storage facilities at 12 locations throughout Australia and New Zealand employing over 200 people. Its facility at Pinkenba has 85 storage tanks.

Industrial action by Airbus Pacific maintenance workers in New South Wales enters fourth month

About 80 aircraft maintenance workers from the RAAF air base at Richmond, west of Sydney, are maintaining protected industrial action begun in early March, after rejecting Airbus Pacific's proposed enterprise agreement. They walked off the job this week for the third time since April and are maintaining industrial action, which includes a ban on overtime work and work-to-rule. Airbus Pacific locked the workers out for two hours on April 17 in response to ongoing work bans.

Negotiations between the Australian Workers Union (AWU) and Airbus for a new agreement stalled in February when the company's sub-inflation wage offer of 7.5 percent over three years was rejected by workers. The current annual inflation rate is 6.8 percent. The AWU claimed that Airbus is refusing to negotiate improvements to its rejected pay offer. The workers have not had a pay increase for 19 months.

Melbourne Zoo animal care workers strike for better pay

Animal care workers at Victoria's state-funded Melbourne Zoo walked off the job on May 24 in a pay dispute with Zoos Victoria. Over 160 members of the United Workers Union and the Community and Public Sector Union employed at Melbourne, Werribee and Healesville zoos began protected industrial action on April 7.

After rejecting the Andrews Labor government pay offer in March, workers approved industrial action ranging from 20 low-level work bans

to unlimited strikes up to 24 hours. The pay offer was in keeping with the government's public sector wage increase cap of 3 percent and a 0.5 percent lump sum "sign on" bonus, a real pay cut compared to the annual inflation rate.

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.

Health workers at a major hospital in Tasmania strike to oppose job cuts

On Monday, workers at the state-run 350-bed Launceston General Hospital (LGH), in northern Tasmania, walked off the job to protest the Rockliff Liberal government's plan to sack 40 hospital aides, ward clerks and environmental service officers whose contracts are due to expire in July.

The workers were hired in 2020 for two years to cover for the hospital's under staffing and alleviate the crisis facing Tasmania's neglected health system made worse by the COVID-19 pandemic. Striking workers held a protest outside the hospital and said they will continue to take action until their voices are heard.

Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation and the Health and Community Services Union officials said LGH was already short staffed and that the government's plans to slash those who were previously described as essential workers will add to current short staffing and mean the closure of some health services and hospital beds.

The ending of these workers' contracts follows the government's decision to end its mediocre anti COVID-19 public health measures even though the virus is still infecting and reinfecting thousands and killing hundreds of people. According to a recent federal government report the rate of COVID-19 infections in Tasmania are the highest of any Australian state. The head of the Australian Medical Association said the state's hospitals were in chaos with doctors, nurses and paramedics "dropping like flies."

Canberra bus drivers reject extending weekend work

Transport Canberra bus drivers at a four-hour stop work meeting at 10 a.m. on May 25 rejected the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) Labor government's plan to extend weekend rosters with no real increase in staffing levels. The plan was part of Chief Minister Andrew Barr's proposed enterprise agreement currently being negotiated with the Transport Workers Union (TWU).

Workers accepted the government's proposed pay offer which would increase drivers' base salary from \$41.72 per hour, as of June 2022, to \$47.21 per hour by December 2025.

Workers rejected the government's plan to trial increasing the frequency of buses on weekends with an offer of a 15 percent penalty rate and a new part-time weekend category, where ordinary hours would be limited to weekend work only and to a maximum of 15 shifts per depot.

A TWU spokesperson described the government's claim that the offer would boost the number of weekend drivers as "tokenistic." He said that there were not enough bus drivers rostered on during the week, which meant those currently employed were doing too much overtime to qualify for weekend work.

The ACT government, with the full support of the TWU and ignoring

opposition from commuters, reduced weekend services in 2019 because of the continued cancellation of buses due to a lack of drivers. The union never took up a genuine struggle to force the government to increase its driver workforce. The government announced that recruitment of additional staff was planned but that would not commence until May 29 next year.

New Zealand nurses hold stop-work meetings over pay offer

The New Zealand Nurses Organisation (NZNO) held a series of stop-work meetings this week to discuss a pay offer from the public health authority, Te Whatu Ora. The 57 meetings nationwide involved some 35,000 nurses, midwives and healthcare assistants.

The union emphatically declared that the meetings were “not about voting on the offer or industrial action,” but called to discuss “next steps in the bargaining process.” The NZNO wants a pay rise in line with the current 6.7 percent inflation rate. Food inflation, however, is running at 12.4 percent

Te Whatu Ora’s offer of \$4,000 across all pay grades and a further 3 percent next year represents a pay cut. The offer has not addressed claims around staffing such as implementing a ratio-based staffing safety net. The entire hospital system is currently plagued by short staffing, over work and chronic underfunding.

Responsibility for the ongoing crisis rests with the Labour government, in office since 2017, and the union. The NZNO has consistently refused to call strike action over the appalling conditions in hospitals or effective pay cuts. Along with all the other unions, it also ensured that there was no organised opposition to the government’s scrapping of its COVID elimination strategy in October 2021, a decision which has severely affected the ability of hospitals to cope.



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