

# 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: Contract child protection workers in Kerala strike indefinitely

Contract workers employed in the Integrated Child Protection Scheme (ICPS) in Kerala's Department of Women and Child Development (WCD), began an indefinite strike on June 1. Nearly 250 workers who were recruited into ICPS in 2009 are still working on fixed-term contracts.

Every year their contract is renewed after a one-day gap, but the approvals take months. During the delay period they are considered daily wage workers and not entitled to maternity, medical and earned leave.

The strike follows a one-day walkout and sit-down protest on May 15 and unsuccessful talks between the state government and the Kerala ICPS Employees Union, which is affiliated with the Centre of Indian Trade Unions.

Workers are demanding that contracts be renewed without any delay and that pay be increased to the state government minimum wage. They are paid a meagre monthly wage of 7,000 rupees (\$US85).

## Chhattisgarh government contract workers hold 37-day protest march

Government contract workers from various departments in Chhattisgarh state began a 37-day protest march on May 16 that will cover 33 districts and end in the state capital Raipur on June 21, where a mass rally will be held. The Rath Yatra (a journey in a chariot accompanied by the public) was organised by the Chhattisgarh All Departmental Contract Employees Union. Workers are demanding permanency.

Nearly 45,000 contract workers are employed in 54 government departments of the state. Many have served in their job for decades, long ago passing the eligible criteria age for being made permanent. Protesters said they will not return home on false promises like they did in the past. They threatened that if the government failed to take concrete steps to grant the demands, they will initiate an indefinite campaign in all government departments.

## Textile workers in Mumbai strike over unpaid wages

Over 2,500 workers from the government-owned National Textiles Corporation (NTC) in Mumbai have been on strike since June 1 over the non-payment of their salaries for the last eight months. Administrative and mill workers said they are struggling to pay bills and buy groceries. They have not been given medical benefits, and gratuities have not been paid since 2020. A spokesperson from the NTC Employees Welfare Forum said 12,000 NTC workers across the country were similarly affected.

NTC closed its mills at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. The industrial court ordered that workers were to be paid full wages during the lockdown, however NTC has been paying only 50 percent of workers' salaries. NTC management unsuccessfully attempted to entice workers back to work by assuring them their wages would be distributed in two weeks but would still be only 50 percent.

## Cambodia: Health workers at shuttered clinics demand jobs back

About 240 doctors, nurses and staff from three closed Centre of Hope Friendship Clinics in Phnom Penh have started a social media campaign calling on the ministry of health to re-authorise operations at their facilities. Workers said they are out of work and unable to support their families and pay bank debts.

The government forced the privately-run clinics to close on May 12 claiming lack of responsible doctors and failure to submit necessary reports. It alleged that the clinics had not complied with regulations. The clinics provided discounted treatment for low income and poor people.

Hope Friendship Clinics said in May that the three branches treated more than 89,628 patients per year since its opening in 2021. They claimed the closures would particularly affect poorer patients, who have been able to receive discounted treatments at these facilities and may not be able to afford treatment elsewhere.

Hundreds of patients requiring ongoing treatment are being turned away from the clinics, but the government has not responded to the health workers' demand for them to be reopened.

## New South Wales paramedics impose bans in long-running pay dispute

Ambulance Division of the Health Services Union (ADHSU) members in New South Wales imposed low-level work bans for 24 hours on Wednesday in their ongoing dispute with the Minns state Labor government for a pay increase and professional recognition. Paramedics refused to accept jobs after the end of their normal shift and banned transferring patients discharged from hospital to their home or a

residential aged care facility.

Paramedics from New South Wales Ambulance have been appealing to the Minns government to honour an election pledge that it would negotiate the lifting of a wage cap on public sector workers. On May 31, HSU members at public hospitals across the state held short stoppages or imposed work bans over the issue.

The wage cap, which applied to all public sector workers, limited annual pay increases to only 3 percent at a time when the state's current consumer price index is 7 percent. The HSU has not run a united campaign involving all public health workers and dragged out the dispute limiting industrial action to short stop-work meetings and minor work bans.

In an attempt to deflect workers' mounting frustrations, the government announced on Monday that it would increase wages for health workers by just 4 percent, plus a 0.5 percent contribution to superannuation. Health workers responded swiftly on Facebook rejecting the offer, with many calling for immediate strike. The HSU hurriedly called Zoom meetings for Wednesday and promised another round of limited action on Tuesday.

### **Genesiscare radiation therapists in South Australia strike**

More than 50 radiation therapists employed at Genesiscare South Australia cancer care clinics in Adelaide began a campaign of industrial action on Monday with a one-hour strike after eight months of negotiations for a new enterprise agreement stalled. Health Services Union (HSU) members rejected the company's sub-inflation pay offer and unanimously voted for industrial action.

Genesiscare had offered a sub-inflation 11 percent wage rise over three years. The HSU claimed it was pursuing a 20 percent increase over the same period to bring therapists' pay in line with colleagues in other Australian states, who on average are paid 30 percent more.

Genesiscare is a transnational cancer care provider with 440 practice locations in Australia, USA, Europe, the Middle East and Africa. The company has \$2 billion in debt and in February suffered a rating downgrade from the S&P ratings agency.

### **Workers on DOF-owned vessels in Western Australia resume industrial action**

The Maritime Union of Australia (MUA), covering over 70 workers on DOF vessels servicing oil and gas facilities off the coast of Western Australia, has announced that indefinite industrial action would commence this week after negotiations for a new agreement failed.

The MUA claimed that it had been close to reaching a deal until DOF reneged on its agreed position regarding Seacare, along with two other issues. The Seacare scheme is a national scheme of workers' compensation and occupational health and safety arrangements for seafaring employees, with certain limits on who is entitled to coverage.

DOF workers unanimously voted in February to take strike action of 4, 12, and 24 hours and 7 days along with bans. They stopped work for five days in April when negotiations stalled. The MUA has not said what the latest industrial action includes.

### **Public hospital doctors in Tasmania take industrial action**

Doctors at the government-owned Royal Hobart Hospital (RHH) and Launceston General Hospital (LGH) in Tasmania recommenced industrial action on June 2 in a dispute with the Rockliff Liberal state government for a new agreement. Industrial action includes not working outside paid hours, not pausing mandatory training, working to roster, refusing extra shifts, claiming overtime and taking entitled lunch and fatigue breaks.

The Australian Medical Association (AMA) claimed low wages paid to Tasmania's public hospital doctors mean new Doctors in Training are refusing to come to work and live in the state. The RHH is unable to fill its anaesthetic training placements and the LGH emergency department is half staffed by locums. The AMA alleged that ongoing short staffing is posing unacceptable risks to the Tasmanian Health Service's operational capability and is putting patients at risk of adverse events.

The AMA has indicated, however, that it is willing to compromise. In a media release on May 25 the association praised the Rockliff government for its recent austere health budget then made clear its demands will be in line with Australia's other states and doctors' wages in the neighbouring state of Victoria.

### **Darebin City Council nurses in Victoria maintain industrial action**

About 30 members of the Australian Nurses and Midwives Federation (ANMF) from the Darebin City Council, in Melbourne's northern suburbs, have been maintaining low-level industrial action begun on May 18. Maternal and child health and immunisation nurses are wearing red campaign t-shirts and stopping work to discuss their action while in dispute with the council over its proposed enterprise agreement.

The nurses' current agreement expired last July and the ANMF and Darebin council began negotiations in September. Negotiations ended when nurses rejected the council's sub-inflation pay offer and voted by a large majority to pursue their claims through industrial action.

The council wants to extend agreement from three to four years and offered pay increases of only 2 percent in the first year, 2.8 percent in the second year and in the remaining two years 80 percent of the Victorian governments still unknown 2024 sub-inflation rate cap. The consumer price index in Melbourne is 6.8 percent while gas and electricity prices are up by 25 and 15 percent respectively.

The ANMF has indicated it will accept a below-inflation pay deal. Its claims include a three-year agreement with improved entitlements and a pay increase in the first year of only 3 percent or \$45 per week (whichever is greater) from 1 July 2022, 3.5 percent or \$45 per week in year two and 3.2 percent increase or \$45 per week in the third year. In real terms this represents a pay cut of over 3 percent.

The isolated struggle of Darebin nurses is occurring as another struggle by 296 Australian Services Union (ASU) outdoor workers at Darebin City Council is erupting.

Like the ANMF, the ASU is keeping its pay demand well below inflation and within the Labor state government's rate cap of 3.5 percent. The ASU is seeking annual pay increases of only 3, 3.5 and 3.2 percent or \$45 per week, whichever is the greater. Their dispute is currently being negotiated in the Fair Work Commission.

### **Australian Ballet performers begin industrial action in pay dispute**

Australian Ballet performers have decided to take industrial action over the company's proposed enterprise agreement. Negotiations between the

Australian Ballet and the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA) for a new agreement have been dragging on since last September.

With no agreement reached by the end of April the performers, near unanimously, voted to approve taking protected industrial action, including a ban on overtime and stoppages between 4 and 24 hours. A major point of contention is management's refusal to maintain a clause in the dancers' contract which guarantees pay will keep pace with the consumer price index (CPI), a guarantee that has been in place for more than 20 years.

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit in 2020, the Australian Ballet cut its dancers' wages by 20 percent and then by 50 percent, supposedly reflecting a reduced workload. The company drew on the federal government's JobKeeper scheme to pay workers. The dancers returned to full pay in 2021 but accepted a one-year pay freeze, which the MEAA did not oppose.

Dancers say they are facing mounting financial hardship, as they try to recover from the pay cut and then a pay freeze during the pandemic. One dancer told the media that some colleagues had to cancel their health insurance and others cannot afford groceries and are living on tuna and rice.

In February this year, the dancers received a 4.3 percent "catch-up" pay rise to meet the obligations of the CPI clause, after receiving just 2.5 percent in 2022 when inflation peaked at over 7 percent. An offer of a 1 percent pay rise for 2023 has been rejected by the dancers.



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