

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

23 June 2023

The World Socialist Web Site invites workers and other readers to contribute to this regular feature.

Taiwan: Migrant caretakers protest in Taipei to demand labour rights

Scores of Filipino and Indonesian migrant caretakers gathered in Taipei on June 18 calling on the Taiwan government to enact a law to protect their rights. Protesters called for a “household service act” that would guarantee the rights of about 220,000 migrant live-in caregivers and domestic helpers in the country.

Workers gathered outside the Taipei Main Station dressed as robots shouting “Long work hours, low salary, no days off”. A worker from the Domestic Caretakers Union said, “We are a minority in Taiwan, but we are the ones taking care of the lives of every sick elderly Taiwanese and their households.”

India: Tamil Nadu construction workers hold state-wide protest for improved benefits

The Construction Workers’ Federation of India (CWFI), affiliated with the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU), called a state-wide protest across Tamil Nadu on June 19 over several demands. These included payment of the Diwali festive bonus of 5,000 rupees (\$US61), increase of the monthly pension to 3,000 rupees and paid from the date a worker turns 60 years of age, and arrears to be paid in case of delayed payments.

CWFI is demanding an increased role for the trade union within the Construction Workers’ Welfare Board. It wants a system where trade union representatives approve all petitions for welfare benefits and for the union to be given the right to sanction membership certificates of construction workers to the Board. Two million workers are registered in the welfare board which has an accumulated fund of 41.5 billion rupees.

Tamil Nadu TASMAC workers demand permanent jobs

Members of the Tamil Nadu State Marketing Corporation (TASMAC) Employees Association, affiliated to CITU, held a protest in Madurai on Tuesday demanding job permanency and time-scale pay. TASMAC is a state-owned company which has a monopoly over wholesale and retail vending of alcoholic beverages in Tamil Nadu.

Workers’ demands included medical benefits, computer-generated billing machines at liquor outlets and other basic facilities as well as a proper transfer policy. They want the pension increased to 3,000 rupees, and in case of the death of a pensioner, provision for a death benefit of 50,000 rupees and a cremation grant of 5,000 rupees.

They also want the free housing scheme of the Welfare Board and the Indian government’s 800,000 rupees (\$US9,767) housing scheme to be combined and available to workers.

Pakistan Railways workers protest overdue salaries

Pakistan Railways Employees Union members held a protest at the diesel engine shed in Lahore on Monday demanding payment of last month’s salary. Workers are concerned that Pakistan Railways are facing severe financial stress and there is a chance their back pay and the Eidul-Adha holiday advance pay will be further delayed.

The union warned that demonstrations would be held at stations across the country if salaries are not paid immediately.

Nepal: Public school administrative unions postpone strike without a guaranteed resolution

A planned June 18 strike by public school administrative workers was called off at the last minute by union representatives following a commitment by the government to enter into talks. The Nepal Public School Employees’ Council, Nepal Public School Employees Association and Nepal School Employees Union threatened that indefinite strike action by administrative staff at all community schools would go ahead if the government refuses to implement past agreements.

Workers accused the government of cheating them after the national budget failed to address the agreements reached with them earlier. The government and the Nepal Public School Employees’ Council had on February 2 reached an agreement in which their salaries were to be adjusted on par with that of civil servants of corresponding levels. The government had made a commitment to address their demands in the upcoming fiscal year, but failed to allocate funds in the budget as per the pledge.

The government threatened that administrative staff or teachers would be sacked if they went on strike and the school management committees would be dissolved if they disrupt classes or fail to hold regular classes.

Workers on DOF-owned vessels in Western Australia still on strike

About 70 Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) members working on DOF vessels servicing oil and gas facilities in Western Australia and Victoria have been on strike since June 14 after negotiations for a new enterprise agreement stalled. While the MUA and DOF have reached a deal on wages and conditions, DOF has refused to maintain contributions to Seacare.

Seacare is a high-priced national scheme for maritime workers. It offers extensive benefits until pension age, covers travel to and from work and has a wide definition of work-related injury. The benefits are recognition of the dangerous work environment and possibility of serious debilitating injury the workers face daily. The union claimed that DOF is trying to push workers onto inferior state government-run schemes.

DOF and other employers in the industry claim that they are having difficulty finding insurers to cover Seacare. The MUA wants a clause inserted in DOF's proposed agreement that guarantees access to Seacare. This means DOF could still be liable for the benefits even if it cannot find an insurer. The union is calling on the federal Labor government to cover the scheme.

Bus drivers on Queensland's Gold Coast hold fare-free day in pay dispute

Transport Workers Union members and other bus workers from global bus conglomerate Kinetic on Queensland's Gold Coast have resumed limited industrial action in their long running dispute for a new enterprise agreement. For the second time since May drivers banned the operation of bus ticketing machines for 24 hours on Friday.

The union ended a series of half-day and one-day strikes in February by drivers, refuellers and cleaners after it struck a pay deal with Kinetic. Workers had not been consulted and opposed the deal which provided paltry pay increases that took drivers' base rate to just \$30 an hour, and cleaners/refuellers to just above \$23 an hour. The TWU tried to justify February's betrayal by saying it would deliver a pay rise until a new two-year enterprise agreement could be negotiated with the company.

The fare-free days in May and last Friday were called by disenchanted workers, represented by an officially-registered "Independent Bargaining Representative" (IBR) group, who are determined to prevent a similar betrayal on a proposed second year enterprise agreement. Their actions, however, are designed to cause minimum disruption to the company's operations and will drag out the dispute until workers are prepared to accept a deal that suits Kinetic.

Strike action by Visy workers in Victoria enters 24th week

Over 40 workers at Visy's Wheeler Street can manufacturing plant in Shepparton, Victoria are continuing rolling strikes begun on January 18 in their dispute over the company's proposed enterprise agreement. Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) members rejected the company's last pay increase offer in March of just 8.75 percent over three years or 2.9 percent per annum.

The workers' last wage increase, in July 2021, was only 1.5 percent. Workers are demanding a pay rise in line with inflation, which still fails to make up for years of below-inflation pay increases. The union has

indicated it would accept a 12 percent pay increase over three years - a real pay cut compared to the current consumer price index of 6.8 percent - meaning an increase over three years would need to be 20.4 percent to keep up with inflation.

AMWU members have been striking for two and three days a week. The union says Visy is refusing to negotiate and has not moved from its March sub-inflation pay rise offer.

Visy is one of Australia's largest private companies, with operations in most Australian states with workers at each factory on separate EAs. There are two Visy factories in Shepparton on separate EAs.

Under the Fair Work Act (FWA), introduced by the former Rudd Labor government and accepted by the unions, it is illegal to take industrial action unless you are negotiating a new agreement. The AMWU, like all other unions, operates within the dictates of the FWA and has kept the Shepparton long-running dispute isolated, preventing a united campaign by all Visy workers across Australia.

New Zealand teachers' union agrees to arbitration in pay dispute

The New Zealand Post Primary Teachers' Association (PPTA), representing about 20,000 high school teachers, this week agreed to join independent arbitration and suspend rolling industrial action if the Labour government pledges to adopt the arbitrator's conclusion in a long-running pay dispute.

Three days of bargaining last week between the PPTA and the Ministry of Education (MoE) failed to reach a settlement. The Employment Relations Authority then stepped in, recommending the union and MoE go into independent arbitration and the PPTA call off industrial action.

The move to arbitration undercut plans by teachers to ramp up industrial action from Wednesday by refusing to supervise extra-curricular activities such as sport. However, the union said its members would continue to refuse to teach particular year groups on different days until the terms of reference were complete.

Teachers have consistently rejected successive attempted pay settlements. The latest offer included a lump sum of \$4,500 and pay rises totalling between 11 to 15.5 percent by the end of 2024. However, with no pay increase since 2021, the offer remains below the inflation rate, currently running at 6.8 percent.

Defying an increasingly hysterical media campaign trying to force a full return to work, a group of Wellington students had earlier thrown their support behind the teachers. The group announced a protest at parliament on Wednesday demanding "fair pay, better class sizes and workload for teachers," as well as ending over 200 job cuts at Victoria University of Wellington.

The PPTA move represents a desperate attempt to close down the deepening dispute. It follows a sell-out deal by the primary teachers' union, the NZ Educational Institute, this month which saw a below-inflation pay deal pushed through following four previous rejections by members.



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