

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.

Asia

South Korean health workers hold 48-hour general strike over unsafe staffing levels

About 45,000 members of the 85,000-strong Korean Health and Medical Workers' Union (KHMU) walked off the job at 7 a.m. on Thursday in a 48-hour strike to demand increased staffing levels, improved working conditions and increased government support for medical institutions. Nurses, pharmacists and caregivers rallied at Gwanghwamun Square in downtown Seoul causing traffic congestion.

The KHMU is demanding that standards be set on the adequate workforce level for each occupation, as well as an increase in the number of doctors, clarification of the scope and boundaries of duties and an expansion of a comprehensive state system for nursing and caregiving.

The union is demanding the enactment of a law to limit the number of patients assigned to a single nurse to five. It alleged that at general hospitals nurses attend to 10.9 patients on average and it is much higher at smaller hospitals.

The action followed pre-strike rallies across the nation on Wednesday. The last time the union went on a general strike was in 2004 when it called for the introduction of a five-day working week.

The government threatened that it would take "firm measures" if the walkout exceeds the limits of their legal rights and causes harm to people's lives. According to one media report, days before the strike, patients were sent home and surgeries were cancelled.

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. Nurses complained that under the existing Act they are often forced to perform tasks that go beyond their professional duties resulting in overwork.

India: Bihar state school contract teachers demand government employee status

Thousands of contract teachers from Bihar state government schools, supported by thousands of job aspirants, demonstrated in the state capital Patna on Tuesday demanding government employee status without conditions. A large contingent of police were deployed to prevent

protesters marching to the state assembly.

In an attempt to pacify protesters, the Bihar finance minister told the media that the chief minister would talk to their representatives. The protests were organised by Bihar Madhyamik Shikshak Sangh (BMSS) and Bihar Rajya Prathamik Shikshak Sangh (BRPSS), two major associations of contract teachers.

Unemployed Madhya Pradesh primary school teachers demand jobs

As part of a year-long campaign, teachers who have qualified for entry into the primary education department have been protesting outside the education department's office in Bhopal since June demanding jobs. On July 10, they ended a fast-unto-death protest begun on July 5, following an assurance given by Congress MLA Sajjan Singh Verma that their grievance would be dealt with in the current session of the state legislature. Several hunger strikers fell sick and had to be hospitalised.

In July 2022, around 194,000 students qualified as primary school educators but the government only advertised 18,000 vacant posts out of the 125,000 that had been created.

Bangladeshi postgraduate trainee physicians strike over low pay

About 8,500 Bangladeshi postgraduate trainee physicians stopped work across the country and held a hunger strike at the Central Shaheed Minar, in Dhaka, on Tuesday. They were demanding an increase in the monthly stipend from 20,000 taka (\$US185) to 50,000 taka and regular payments. The Postgraduate Private Trainee Doctors Association threatened to continue their protest if demands were not met.

Postgraduate trainee physicians work at different hospitals across the country to practice specialised training in a specific medical field for 2 to 5 years to achieve higher degrees. The trainees held a protest at the Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University campus in Dhaka on June 13 over unpaid payments and the stipend increase.

Sri Lankan dengue suppression assistance workers protest for job security

Hundreds of dengue suppression assistance workers from regional health services held protests this week demanding to be made permanent. Some have been in the job for seven years. Workers from Wadduwa,

Matugama (in Western province) and Polonnaruwa (in North Central province) joined the protest.

Dengue is a major health issue in Sri Lanka with over 40,000 new infections each year. In 2017 there was a surge with 184,000 people infected.

Australia and the Pacific

UGL Rail Services workers in New South Wales hold third strike

Over 120 electricians and mechanical trades workers from the UGL Rail Services Facility at Broadmeadow, Newcastle, walked off the job for 24 hours on Friday. The Electrical Trades Union (ETU) and the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) are in dispute with UGL over its proposed enterprise agreement. The action followed a strike by 60 workers on July 14 and 200 workers on July 5 at the company's Ganinan facility in nearby Georgetown.

Their current agreement expired in April with negotiations for a replacement agreement ongoing for eight months. An ETU representative told the media that the unions had already compromised on some of their claims.

While the AMWU and ETU say workers are paid \$7 an hour less than their peers at competing companies, the unions are only seeking an 18 percent pay rise over three years, or 6 percent annual increases. This is below the current annual inflation rate of 6.8 percent and fails to compensate for years of below industry standard wages.

Cleanaway waste collection workers in Sydney walk out for seventh time

Cleanaway waste collection workers in the City of Sydney stopped work for 24 hours on July 7 in their seventh strike in twelve months over Cleanaway's attack on pay and conditions in the company's proposed enterprise agreement. The action followed strikes by hundreds of Cleanaway waste collection workers in Victoria, Queensland, Western Australia and the Australian Capital Territory this year in opposition to the company's proposed agreement.

Cleanaway's proposed agreements 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 Transport Workers Union (TWU), previously agreed quality of life provisions are under attack and health and safety would be reduced.

The 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.

The TWU has dragged out the disputes by minimising strike action to between 24 and 48 hours to minimise their effect. The Sydney dispute has been ongoing for over 12 months with ad-hoc limited strikes at various depots which are aimed at attempting to force local councils who hold the contracts with Cleanaway to intervene in support of the workers. Meanwhile, the workers' resolve is being worn down to the point where

they will accept a compromised union/company deal.

Saputo dairy factory workers in Victoria on strike for better pay

About 20 maintenance workers from Saputo's Allansford dairy factory at Warrnambool in Victoria have been on strike since July 6 in their fight for an improved pay offer in the company's proposed enterprise agreement. United Workers Union members are maintaining production at the plant.

Australian Manufacturing Workers Union and Electrical Trades Union members voted unanimously in June to take strike action after 12 months of failed negotiations. Workers rejected Saputo's below-inflation pay increase offer of only 13 to 14 percent over 4 years, at best, 3.3 percent a year.

The unions restricted their pay increase demand to just 16 percent over three years, or annual increases of 5.3 percent, still below the inflation rate of 6.8 percent. The workers' last pay increase was just 2.4 percent in 2021. The unions are also calling for more apprentices and streamlining of leave provisions.

Saputo is a multibillion dollar transnational company employing around 1,300 workers in multiple dairy processing plants across Australia. Through past agreements the unions have allowed the Allansford plant workers to become the lowest paid employees in the Saputo group.

Diabetes Victoria nurse educators strike for pay rise

Nurse educators from Diabetes Victoria (DV) stopped work for two hours and rallied outside its headquarters in Melbourne on July 6. The action followed limited work bans begun on June 27 in support of their demands for higher wages in a new enterprise agreement.

The nurses' wages have been frozen since their current agreement expired in June 2020. Their last pay increase was in October 2019. The nine nurses, represented by the Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation (ANMF), rejected DV's sub-inflation pay offer of 3 percent annual increases from October 2021 through to October 2023. It is well below the current inflation rate of 6.8 percent and does not compensate for the pay freeze imposed at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic supported by the union.

The ANMF opposed DV's pay offer saying that their members would be paid 8 percent less than their colleagues in the public health sector. The union has dragged out the dispute with token industrial action and convincing nurses that they can win their struggle by encouraging clients and the community to email Diabetes Victoria management.

BHP outsourced Queensland mine workers stop work for four hours demanding better pay

Production workers from BHP's in-house job hire company Operation Services (OS) held a four-hour strike on July 4 at BHP's Goonyella Riverside open cut coal mine in the Bowen Basin, Central Queensland. The strike was part of wider protected industrial action at six BHP Bowen Basin mines where 4,500 OS production workers are in dispute over BHP's proposed enterprise agreement.

The Mining and Energy Union (MEU), a division of the Construction Maritime Mining and Energy Union, rejected OS's latest pay offer of 4 percent saying it was substandard and does not resolve other outstanding issues. MEU members voted near unanimously in early June to approve industrial action following 20 failed negotiation meetings.

Otis Elevators installation and maintenance electricians in New South Wales strike

Electrical Trades Union members from Otis Elevators in Sydney, New South Wales, walked off the job for 4 hours on Monday and again on Tuesday in opposition to the company's proposed enterprise agreement. This was their first industrial action in 8 years. The union said further action is possible, depending on talks with the company over its proposed enterprise agreement. Workers are demanding a pay increase that meets the cost of living.

New Zealand bus drivers strike

Bus drivers in Auckland, New Zealand's biggest city, held a series of rolling stoppages this week. Beginning Monday, the strikes in the first hour of morning shifts affected up to 700 bus trips daily during peak hour commutes on routes operated by NZ Bus.

The Tramways Union said no resolution to a pay dispute has been reached through mediation. The drivers are seeking the same \$30 per hour wage paid to drivers in Wellington, Christchurch and Dunedin. Auckland drivers are currently paid an average \$26.76 per hour. The list of demands also includes a reduction in shifts from 14 to 12 hours.

Although the Labour government subsidises private bus companies' wages by \$61 million, in cities around New Zealand there are major shortages, cancellations and service disruptions.

The unions have agreed to \$31 per hour for the minority of Auckland drivers on "flat rate" contracts, but for most on traditional contracts including overtime and penalty rates NZ Bus is offering that rate only starting from March 2024.

Despite media claims that the strikes were held at short notice, a First Union spokesperson said it was not a surprise to NZ Bus, and the unions had delayed strike action twice during the last month as negotiations continued "fruitlessly."

New Zealand blood laboratory workers strike

Blood laboratory workers in Wellington and the South Island employed by privately-owned Awanui Labs began a four-day strike on Thursday. Phlebotomists and lab workers want a pay rise of 23.5 percent to close the wage gap with the public sector, up to \$6,000 more a year.

A spokesperson for the Apex union said members had voted overwhelmingly in favour of striking. Awanui made substantial profits during the Covid-19 pandemic, earning \$70 for every PCR test processed.

Awanui and Apex were due to go into mediation this week with APEX declaring it was ready to end the strike if the company "stepped up." Workers are planning further action towards the end of the month if an agreement cannot be reached.

Fiji energy workers voting on industrial action

Some 355 workers at Energy Fiji Ltd (EFL) voted in a strike ballot last week. EFL has more than 800 workers, most of whom are covered by two unions, the Fiji Electricity Workers Association and Construction, Energy and Timber Workers Union (CETWU). The strike ballot closed on Friday.

CETWU members say their demands for higher pay, retirement benefits, long service leave, and other working conditions are not being met. Union secretary John Alexander Paul said the employer unilaterally reduced workers' base pay salary, removed retirement benefits, long service leave and other conditions from 2021–23. He called on the government to "investigate, discuss things and clean the organisation."

EFL announced this week that staff below management level have received a 5 percent pay rise, backdated to 1st January, claiming that the total wages increase from 2015 to 2023 amounts to 23 percent. This remains well below the overall inflation rate, which averaged 5.6 percent per annum during that period.



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