

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

21 July 2023

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

India: Tamil Nadu municipal sanitation workers protest move to outsource jobs

Thousands of sanitation workers organised by the Stalinist Red Flag Union demonstrated outside the Greater Chennai Corporation building on July 12 to protest the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam-led state government moves to contract out jobs.

The union claimed that outsourcing would end permanent jobs at urban local bodies. Workers are also opposing a government order issued on June 16 that kept the minimum wage at the same level set six years ago. Under the order, a new worker would draw a lower wage than the present minimum due to reduction in the dearness allowance.

Media reported that sanitation works in corporations, municipalities and town panchayats are being outsourced at a fast pace, creating anxiety and job insecurity. The state government, through local bodies, has invited tenders for carrying out sanitation work, with three government orders issued so far to initiate the process.

Delhi water utility workers protest privatisation

Water utility workers from the Delhi Jal Board (DJB) staged a sit-in protest at the Jal Board headquarters in Delhi on July 17 to demand a ban on contracting and privatisation. Protesters also complained of unrealistic targets and a hostile work environment. DJB is the government agency responsible for supplying potable water to most of the National Capital Territory region of Delhi.

DJB workers were falsely assured by the Delhi chief minister last year that their jobs were secure. The government made 700 contract DJB employees permanent early last year. He then boasted it was a landmark step which went against a nationwide trend of privatisation and decreasing permanent employees.

The Delhi government has been pushing privatisation of the territory's water supply since 2010 claiming it would increase supply and improve drinking water quality. On June 25, DJB workers protested in Delhi over the shortage of palatable drinking water in Delhi. Delhi's chief minister responded saying the government was taking steps to enhance the water supply capacity but did not say how this would be achieved.

Bangladeshi secondary-level school teachers strike for their jobs to be nationalised

Teachers from government-supported secondary-level Monthly Pay Order (MPO)-enlisted education institutions have been on strike since Monday demanding their jobs be absorbed into the national education system on equal terms with government teachers. Hundreds of teachers organised by the Bangladesh Teachers' Association have withstood police attacks and maintained protests in Dhaka since July 11.

Teachers said they will continue their protest despite the fact that the government announced a five percent incentive to their basic salary from July 1, in line with its decision to provide similar incentives to all public servants.

Teachers want their entry-level salary of 16,000 taka (\$US147) to be a basic wage, up from the current 2,500 taka, and for treatment allowances to be lifted from 500 to 1,500 taka. They also want the religious festival allowance to be lifted to 25 percent of the basic wage and house rent allowance increased from the current 1,000 taka to 45 percent of the basic wage.

According to Bangladesh Education Statistics 2022, around 200,000 teachers from 16,766 junior secondary and secondary schools currently get MPO facilities. These teachers have staged protests since 2018 in support of their demands.

Sri Lankan health workers protest sub-standard medicine in government hospitals

Thousands of government health workers held an island-wide protest on July 18 over health authorities' callous attitude for not safeguarding the lives of patients and not providing adequate approved medicine for treatment. Protests were held in major hospitals in Colombo and in other provinces.

There were protests outside the health ministry, the Colombo National Hospital, regional hospitals at Matara in the Southern Province, Chilaw in the Northwestern Province and Hingurakgodra in the North Central Province.

Protesters displayed placards saying "Prevent importation of inferior medicines," "Patients' lives in danger," "Stop privatisation of health services," and "Let's get rid of the dysfunctional government that takes the lives of patients."

The All Ceylon Nursing Association accused the government of planning privatisation of health services and importing anaesthetic drugs without approval of the National Medicines Regulatory Authority. The association claimed that there were more than twenty patients who had allergic conditions after eye operations in the National Hospital and

Nuwara-Elia base hospital, some of them fully blinded.

Queensland power workers walk out for higher pay

About 100 members of the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union and the Electrical Trades Union walked off the job at the government-owned Stanwell Power Station in the Rockhampton Region, north of Brisbane, and protested outside the plant on Tuesday. Workers voted unanimously on July 4 to take protected industrial action after rejecting the government's proposed enterprise agreement. Approved action included indefinite and consecutive work stoppages between one and eight hours. Neither union has revealed details of the government's pay offer nor if further industrial action is planned.

Airbus Pacific workers in New South Wales reject latest pay offer

About 80 aircraft maintenance workers employed by Airbus Pacific at the RAAF air base at Richmond, west of Sydney, have again rejected the company's proposed enterprise agreement which attacks working conditions. The company requested that workers trade their work boots and first aid allowance for an improved pay offer and back pay.

The highly skilled workers are members of the Australian Workers Union, which has dragged out industrial action begun in early March. Workers are maintaining rolling one-hour stoppages and a ban on overtime and work-to-rule with little effect on the company.

Negotiations between the union and Airbus for a new agreement stalled in February when the company's sub-inflation 7.5 percent wage increase offer over three years was rejected by workers. In March, Airbus offered the workers an additional pair of pants in lieu of an improved pay offer, which was rejected. The workers have not had a pay increase since August 2021.

An AWU spokesperson claimed that Airbus workers at RAAF bases in Brisbane, Townsville, Darwin and Sydney receive higher pay than their counterparts at Richmond. Airbus has threatened to lock out the workers, while the AWU has not indicated if current limited industrial action will be accelerated.

Bus drivers on Queensland's Gold Coast hold more fare-free days

Transport Workers Union (TWU) members and other bus workers from global bus conglomerate Kinetic on Queensland's Gold Coast are continuing limited industrial action in their long running dispute for a new enterprise agreement. TWU members turned off their ticketing machines for three days from Wednesday, giving passengers free rides. The action followed fare-free days in June and May.

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.

Separately from this week's action, workers covered by an officially-

registered Independent Bargaining Representative (IBR) group will turn their ticketing machines off next Thursday and Friday.

Mine construction workers at Olive Downs strike for higher travel allowance

Construction Forestry Maritime Mining and Energy Union (CFMMEU) members at the Olive Downs coal mining project in the Bowen Basin, Central Queensland, walked off the job on July 14 to demand an increase in their travel allowance. The workers are in dispute with construction contractors CIMIC-CPB and Sedgman because they have to travel 1.5 hours each way to the work site but are only paid a flat \$40 allowance. The union claimed that other contractors were paying workers a "proper" travel rate, or an allowance of up to \$75. About 200 workers are involved in the dispute.

Industrial action at Santos natural gas plant in South Australia enters ninth month

The Australian Workers Union (AWU) and the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) are dragging out a dispute by members employed by Santos at its Cooper Basin extraction plant in northern South Australia and their Port Bonython LNG port facility, near Whyalla, South Australia. Workers began limited industrial action in November, which includes rolling stoppages and interruption of work to connect and disconnect oil tankers and gas carriers at Port Bonython.

The AWU claimed it was trying to do a deal for a 5 percent per year pay rise, or a pay rise linked to consumer price index (CPI) increases, backdated to July 2020, as well as protection of entitlements. The unions have allowed negotiations with Santos to drag on for nearly a year, leaving members without a pay increase for three years.

Peters Ice Cream factory maintenance workers in Victoria strike

Ten maintenance workers from the Peters Ice Cream factory at Mulgrave, a suburb in Melbourne, walked out for 24 hours and protested outside the plant on Monday in their dispute over the company's proposed enterprise agreement. Workers voted unanimously to take protected industrial action on July 3 after the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) failed to reach a deal with the company for a new agreement.

Their current agreement expired in March and the workers have not had a pay increase since April 2022, which was only 2.75 percent, at the time the consumer prices index (CPI) was above 7 percent. The AMWU has not indicated if further industrial action is planned. Workers voted to take action that includes a ban on working overtime and indefinite consecutive work stoppages up to a duration of one week.

Saputo dairy workers' strike in Victoria enters third week

About 20 maintenance workers from Saputo's Allansford factory at Warrnambool in Victoria have been on strike since July 6 for an improved enterprise agreement pay offer. While they maintain a protest line outside the factory, the United Workers Union is allowing its members to continue production in the plant.

The workers' last pay increase was only 2.4 percent on July 1, 2021. Base wage rates range from just \$20 to \$25 per hour, depending on classification. The Australian Manufacturing Workers Union and the Electrical Trades Union have dragged out negotiations for over 12 months. 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 hoped to reach a deal with Saputo by restricting their pay rise 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 unions are also calling for more apprentices and the 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.

Deakin University educators strike in Victoria

More than 700 Deakin University teaching staff from its Victorian campuses in Warrnambool, Geelong and Burwood are maintaining industrial action begun in May in their dispute for an improved enterprise agreement offer. National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) members are maintaining selected work bans and on Thursday struck for 24 hours.

The industrial action follows a near-unanimous vote by NTEU members in April to take protected industrial action following eight months of failed negotiations with Deakin management. Deakin offered sub-inflation annual pay increases of just 2.85 percent. Management also wants increased casualisation, zero-hour contracts and an end to the current workload model of 40 percent teaching, 40 percent research and 20 percent administration.

The NTEU claims it is demanding annual wage increases equal to the consumer prices index (CPI), plus 1.5 percent, but has indicated it would settle for a 15 percent increase over the life of a four-year agreement. This equated to annual increases of only 3.75 percent, well below the current CPI of 6.8 percent. Nor does it account for workers' wage losses since their last pay rise of 2 percent in June 2020.

Educators are demanding workload protections, job security and an end to the university's decade's long treadmill of casualisation and rolling contracts. The NTEU estimates only three out of ten Deakin educators have full-time permanent work and that the rise in insecure work has gone hand-in-hand with institutional wage theft especially from low-paid insecure casual staff.

New Zealand senior doctors hold stop work meetings over pay

Senior salaried doctors and dentists in New Zealand will be holding stop-work meetings to discuss potential strike action. The Association of Medical Specialists (ASMS) national executive unanimously rejected a recent salary offer by Te Whatu Ora, the NZ health ministry, declaring it "fell far below what is necessary."

The union plans to run virtual stop-work meetings in the first week of August, followed by face-to-face events from August 7-14, to discuss an

industrial campaign and poll members ahead of a formal ballot for industrial action.

Te Whatu Ora offered \$4,000 on pay rates from April, and a 3 percent increase from October, which would have been an annualised rise of 3 percent for most members. The ASMS claim would have delivered a seven to eight percent increase across 12 months, marginally above inflation; added a new salary step to provide progression for those at the top pay step; and remove the bottom step to address a salary overlap between advanced trainees and early-career senior medical officers (SMOs).

ASMS President Julian Vyas? said SMO salaries have gone backwards since the onset of the COVID pandemic due to rising costs of living and senior medical officers and dentists felt tired and burnt out. Considering strike action was necessary, he said, "We really feel we've got no choice, because just pointing out these things has not resulted in change."

New Zealand Westpac Bank workers reject below-inflation pay offer

Workers at Westpac Bank in New Zealand rejected an "insulting" pay offer this week, which they said is not enough considering the bank's large profits. Westpac is one of the largest banks in the Australasian market and last year made over a billion dollars in profit. The workers have been voting this week on taking industrial action.

Since 2021, Westpac workers have received pay increases well below the rate of inflation, currently 6.8 percent. More than 95 percent of Westpac's First Union members voted to reject the bank's 7 percent pay increase over 18-months. After four months of bargaining, Westpac responded with an offer of an additional one-off lump sum payment of \$1,000. A union spokesperson said workers were feeling "shafted" by the bank, a sentiment felt by workers across the industry.

New Zealand nurses vote overwhelmingly for 24-hour strike

New Zealand public hospital nurses have voted overwhelmingly in support of a 24-hour strike in August. The NZ Nurses Organisation (NZNO) said that the strike will take place on August 9-10, starting at 7am. NZNO CEO Paul Goulter said the strike ballot, which closed Wednesday, had very high participation and an "absolutely decisive" result.

Negotiations with Te Whatu Ora (Health NZ) have been ongoing since the current agreement expired in October. Goulter said claims in negotiations for safer staffing practices, nurse-to-patient ratios, and health and safety have "pretty much fallen on deaf ears" and members "have simply had enough".

The union will proceed with the strike unless members vote to ratify the most recently received offer. A ratification vote on the offer will run from August 1 to August 7. NZNO members are also set to vote on a Pay Equity offer, which is meant to address long-standing gender discrimination. This is a separate process from collective agreement negotiations.



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