

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

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

## India: BEML workers protest Modi government's privatisation drive

Workers from the government-owned Bharat Earth Movers Limited (BEML) are maintaining protests begun in January 2021 in opposition to the Modi government's move to sell 26 percent of its equity share capital of 54 percent in the company.

Thousands of workers have been protesting at the company's four units at Kanjikode (Kerala), Kolar Gold Field (Karnataka), Mysuru (Karnataka) and Bengaluru (Karnataka). Protests involving human chains, candlelight and sit-down protests have been dominated by the Stalinist Centre for Indian Trade Unions (CITU).

BEML, which employs nearly 8,000 workers, manufactures heavy equipment for earth moving, transport, mining and other applications. Since 1964 it has been manufacturing equipment for defence, mining, railway and metro sectors.

Workers accused India's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led government of planning to sell the company, estimated to be worth 560 billion rupees (\$US6.8 billion), for less than 20 billion rupees.

## Bangladesh: Tea garden workers in Sylhet demand outstanding wages

Over 600 tea gardens workers in Habiganj town, located in Sylhet, began an indefinite strike on Tuesday over outstanding wages and allowances. Workers from the Imam Tea Garden and Bawani Tea Garden of the Nabiganj sub-district have been holding a sit-down protest outside the Imam factory since Sunday. Protesters submitted their demands to the Habiganj deputy commissioner's office on Tuesday.

Workers want all outstanding wages, as well as festival allowances, and reimbursement of the provident fund paid immediately and a guarantee that their house rents and medical allowances are maintained. Protesters alleged that the leaseholders of the gardens have not paid outstanding wages of 8 million taka (\$US74,000) and festival allowances of 1.4 million taka that remained since the 2019 financial year.

## Australian Capital Territory electricity workers strike for higher pay

Over 150 workers from the part government-owned power generating and distribution company Evoenergy walked off the job for four hours and demonstrated in Canberra on Tuesday. Electrical Trades Union (ETU) members said they will continue to take short strikes of 15 to 30 minutes for the rest of the week.

Workers voted near unanimously on July 17 to take strike action after rejecting the company's proposed enterprise agreement. An ETU spokesman told media that members opposed Evoenergy's 9.5 percent pay increase offer over three years and its refusal to increase superannuation payments.

Workers accepted a low pay increase in the last agreement, which expired in June, in return for a higher superannuation pay. Under the federal government's superannuation guarantee entitlements workers across all industries are to receive a superannuation pay increase of 1.5 percent over the next three years to bring total payments to 12 percent of salary. ETU members are already being paid 12 percent, which Evoenergy refuses to increase in the new agreement.

## New South Wales paramedics impose work bans in pay dispute

Australian Paramedics Association (ASA) members from NSW Ambulance have begun state-wide industrial action for a pay increase above the state Labor government's pay increase cap of 4 percent applied to all state government workers. This is well below the current 6.6 percent consumer price index (CPI) rate for NSW.

From July 26 to August 2 APA members banned recording billing information and other administrative recordings, as well as not attending special events like sporting and entertainment unless for an emergency. In addition, paramedics will refuse to attend non-urgent patient transfers for 24 hours on July 31.

APA members also want to reduce delays in attending emergencies through increasing the number of specialist paramedics, increased community care and regional healthcare and improved training.

In a separate dispute, Ambulance Division of the Health Services Union (ADHSU-NSW) members imposed an indefinite ban on covering sporting events commencing July 29, unless for an emergency. The ban is part of their struggle to gain professional recognition on par with other professional health workers in the NSW Health System.

## Australian National University teaching staff walk out for better pay and conditions

About 700 National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) members at the

Australian National University (ANU) in Canberra walked out of offices and classrooms for half a day on Thursday to demand better pay and improved conditions in ANU's proposed enterprise agreement. The union also issued notice of full day strikes for August 7 and 8.

The current agreement expired in June 2021, but the union delayed entering negotiations until November 2022 even though members have not had a pay increase since July 2022.

A union spokesperson told media there were four main issues in contention: higher pay, healthier workloads, more flexible work opportunities and better job security for casual staff.

The union wants a reduction in casual staff and the opportunity for existing casuals to move into more secure jobs. Members rejected ANU's revised pay offer last week which provided an 18.5 percent pay increase over the five-year life of the proposed EA.

Management claimed the university was committed to ending "inappropriate" casualisation of its workforce and was prepared to end most casualised contracts for non-students but has not committed to giving detail.

### **Darebin City Council nurses in Victoria continue 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 since 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. On July 21 they stopped work for two hours and held a public rally in Preston. The action followed a one-hour strike and protest outside the Darebin Town Hall on June 27.

The current agreement expired in June 2022 and the ANMF and Darebin council began negotiations in September. Council offered the nurses a pay increase when the current agreement expired, but it was rejected by the nurses, saying it was too low. They have not had a pay increase since July 2021.

The council wants to extend the agreement from three to four years with annual pay increases of only 2 percent or \$30 a week in the first year, 3 percent in the second year or \$45 and in the remaining two years 80 percent of the Victorian government's still unknown 2024 sub-inflation rate cap.

The ANMF is demanding a sub-inflation pay increase that is only slightly better than the council's offer. The union wants the EA to remain at three years, with pay increases of only 3 percent or \$45 per week (whichever is greater) from 1 July 2022, 3.5 per cent increase or \$45 per week from 1 July 2023 and 3.2 per cent increase or \$45 per week from 1 July 2024. In effect this would be a pay cut considering the consumer price index in Melbourne is 6.8 percent while gas and electricity prices are up by 25 and 15 percent respectively.

The union also wants improved education access, allowances increased annually in line with wage increases, two 10-minute tea breaks and parking permits for community MCHN visits.

### **Darebin City Council administrative and field staff hold third strike in pay dispute**

More than 400 workers from Darebin City Council, in city planning,

waste management, construction, cleansing, parks, by-laws and other departments, walked off the job for the third time in three weeks on July 21. Members of the Australian Services Union have been in dispute with the council since May 2 after voting down its proposed enterprise agreement.

The council proposed extending the agreement from three to four years duration, changing shift start times for some workers, no wage rises and an end union consultation on major workplace changes.

The council's latest offer to its lower-paid staff is for wage rises of 2 percent or \$30 a week in the first year, 3 percent or \$45 in the second year and 2 percent or 36 percent, or 85 percent of the state Labor government's rate cap in the third year.

The ASU claimed that the council is trying to remove over 23 allowances and conditions from the agreement which will cost workers around \$50 a week. This means that the promised \$45 a week pay rise would mean many workers would be behind by \$5 a week and some up to \$100 a week. The current agreement expired in June 2022 and the workers have not had a pay increase since July 2021.

Workers are maintaining selected work bans, and they accuse the council of using contract workers as strike breakers. The ASU has dragged out negotiations for over a year and kept industrial action at a minimum while calling on local residents to attend council meetings to pressure councillors to "protect working conditions at Darebin."

### **New Zealand education field staff impose work bans over pay**

New Zealand Ministry of Education field staff began a month-long ban on all work outside the hours of 8.30 a.m. to 4.40 p.m. from last Monday after failing to reach agreement with the Ministry over a collective agreement. They will also not take on new cases during this time.

The psychologists, speech therapists, and special education advisers represented by the NZ Educational Institute voted in favour of strike action following months of negotiations.

Speech therapist Conor Fraser said the ban spoke to the "excessive caseloads and the severe shortage of specialist staff" in learning support. Earlier this year, there were over 200 vacancies for specialist roles. "We want the Ministry to understand that caseloads should be equitable, fair, and reasonable," Fraser said. She described the first offer they received as "very disappointing" because it included an element of performance based pay.

The largest ever education sector strike was held by 50,000 teachers in March, but the NZEI has forced through settlements for primary and kindergarten teachers with below-inflation pay rates. The secondary teachers' union, the Post Primary Teachers' Association, has taken its pay dispute into arbitration.

### **Fiji energy workers vote to strike**

Last week 355 workers at Energy Fiji Ltd (EFL) voted in a secret ballot to take strike action over wages and conditions. The Energy and Timber Workers Union (CETWU) confirmed 99 percent of its members voted and that over 50 percent had voted in favour. The vote is an indication that workers are seeking to fight back after a long period of quiescence imposed by the unions during the height of the COVID pandemic.

EFL has more than 800 workers, most of whom are covered by the Fiji Electricity Workers Association and CETWU. The workers say their

demands for higher pay, retirement benefits, long service leave, and other working conditions are not being met. They are also demanding long-term work contracts. All are under a three-year individual contract, and many have not had a pay raise for some years. The union declared it has a strike mandate but has held off announcing any dates.



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