

# 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: Assam public sector workers strike for restoration of former pension scheme**

Tens of thousands of public sector workers across Assam state stopped work for two days on Tuesday to demand withdrawal of the New Pension Scheme (NPS) and restoration of the previous scheme. Workers from education, law, railways, health and other departments demonstrated outside their respective state offices. They submitted a memorandum of demands to the prime minister and the state chief minister through their respective district commissioners.

Public sector workers across India have been holding demonstrations for several years demanding reinstatement of the old pension scheme which was withdrawn in 2003. It did not require a 10 percent contribution from employees' salaries and the pension was determined by the employees' final salary. The pension in the new scheme is reduced and there is no death benefit.

In Assam around 350,000 out of nearly 500,000 government workers have been forced into the NPS. According to the All Assam Government NPS Employees' Association, the monthly pension for retired workers ranged between a meagre 500 and 3,000 rupees (\$US36).

## **Maharashtra textile machinery manufacturing workers' strike in third week**

Workers from the Switzerland-based Rieter India textile machinery manufacturing plant in Wing, Maharashtra state, are maintaining a strike they began on August 8 to oppose unfair labour practices, including unlawful employment of contract workers. Over 350 workers struck in January over the same issues.

The federation has accused management of trying to weaken the union by transferring seven union leaders, including the general secretary and president and 20 other workers, to distant locations under the pretence of training. Twenty workers have also been suspended on fake accusations and nine union members, including two union representatives, have been abruptly dismissed after the union issued the strike notice.

## **Sri Lanka government hospital paramedics strike over worsening conditions**

About 7,000 paramedics and supplementary health workers from government hospitals held an island-wide 24-hour strike on Thursday to oppose the government's attack on working conditions. The strike was called by the United Federation of Supplementary Services Unions and included radio technologists, medical laboratory scientists, pharmacists, physiotherapists and occupational therapists.

Workers were protesting staff shortages, lack of recruitment, and the suppression of trade unions on unfair disciplinary actions.

## **Kahawatta Base Hospital in Sri Lanka workers protest medicine shortages**

About 100 workers from the Kahawatta Base Hospital in Sabaragamuwa province protested on Wednesday outside the facility to demand supplies of approved medicines. Protesters displayed placards against inferior quality drugs and a banner asking for workers to join action against the government "that is destroying the health system and sacrifices lives."

The protest followed island-wide demonstrations on July 18 over the issue. Health workers have accused the government of planning the privatisation of health services and importing anaesthetic drugs without approval of the National Medicines Regulatory Authority. The All Ceylon Nursing Association claimed that the inferior medicines were causing allergic reactions and, in some cases, have caused blindness.

## **Queensland midwives protest unsafe conditions and staff shortages**

Hundreds of midwives from the Queensland Nurses and Midwives' Union (QNMU), the Australian College of Midwives and midwifery practice My Midwives demonstrated outside state parliament on Monday to highlight the worsening crisis in Queensland's maternity wards.

A spokesperson from QNMU said there are too few staff to guarantee safe conditions for pregnant mothers and newborn babies in the state. She said some regional hospitals have so few staff that maternity wards have been put on "bypass," with patients sent elsewhere. One union member told the media the union's audit found that 11 percent of Queensland midwives were tasked with looking after 20 mothers at once.

The QNMU wants the introduction of ratios in maternity inpatient wards, public funding for homebirths and a state-wide workforce plan. It also wants "immediate and appropriate" funding to support the expansion of access to midwifery group practice—a model of care based on a close relationship between the patient and one midwife.

Shannon Fentiman, the Queensland Labor government's health minister, met with the union on Wednesday after which the QNMU

falsely declared a win. According to a QNMU Facebook posting the minister committed \$16 million of funding to “midwifery initiatives” pursued by members. “While there is still more work to do, this is a massive win for midwives, mothers and babies in Queensland,” the post said.

The \$16 million is not additional spending, however, but will be extracted from the original \$42 million allocated in the state Labor budget for regional birthing services. There has been no concrete agreement on any of the midwives’ demands.

### **Tram workers in Adelaide strike after pay negotiations stall**

Tram workers in Adelaide, the capital of South Australia, struck for three hours on Friday after negotiations between the Rail Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) and tram operator Torrens Connect for a new enterprise agreement (EA) reached deadlock. An RTBU spokesman claimed a deal could not be reached while Torrens Connect management was “playing hardball” and refused to meet the union’s “modest and reasonable” demands.

The workers want a three-year agreement with 3 percent annual pay increases, or CPI, whichever is greater, removal of split-shift provision from the agreement to reduce fatigue and improved training with a recognised Light Rail Operators Certificate issued to all operators.

### **South32 mine supervisors in New South Wales continue strike**

Striking mine supervisors from the South32 Appin coal mine in the Illawarra area, south of Sydney, voted to extend their strike for another week. Industrial action was initially due to end on Friday but has been extended to September 1.

About 30 members of the Collieries’ Staff and Officials Association (CSOA) walked out on August 11 after eight months of failed negotiations over South32’s proposed enterprise agreement. Workers rejected the company’s below inflation pay offer of 6.3 percent. CSOA wants an improved offer and a production bonus in a year when the mine’s profitability skyrocketed to \$US1.38 billion.

CSOA claimed the proposed agreement failed to meet several conditions, including rostering for public holidays and left key conditions outside the workplace agreement, which would mean they could be changed at any time by management.

Trying to divide the mine’s workforce, management has closed part of its operations, falsely claiming that without supervisors on the job, safety could not be guaranteed, and threatened to stand down some production workers as a result.

### **Australian Capital Territory power utility workers’ industrial action in fourth month**

About 150 Electrical Trades Union (ETU) members from the partially state-owned power utility Evoenergy have been holding rolling one-hour stoppages since July 25 to demand an improved enterprise agreement. At a rally of workers at Evoenergy’s Greenway depot in Canberra on Wednesday the ETU made a useless call on the territory government to

“explain why they are allowing Evoenergy to treat hard-working employees with contempt.”

Some 90 percent of ETU members approved taking protected industrial action on July 17 after rejecting management’s low pay offer of 8 percent over three years, less than 3 percent a year. The annualised consumer price index rate at June for the Australian Capital Territory was 5.8 percent, meaning the pay offer needs to be over 17 percent to keep pace with inflation.

The union has kept industrial action at a minimum, even though members near unanimously approved taking unlimited 8-hour strike action.

### **Kinetic bus drivers in Queensland continue industrial action in long running pay dispute**

Transport Workers Union (TWU) members and other bus workers from three Queensland subsidiaries of global bus conglomerate Kinetic turned off their ticketing machines for three days on Thursday in their long-running dispute for an improved enterprise agreement. The action by drivers from Clarks Logan City Buses, Sunbus and Surfside, southeast Queensland, followed a 24-hour strike on August 16 and fare-free days in June and May.

The TWU ended a series of half-day and one-day strikes in February 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 workers, including drivers, refuellers and cleaners, are fighting for a higher pay increase, higher standards of safety and better consultation in a new enterprise agreement. They are determined to improve on the substandard deal struck by the union in February.

### **Melbourne University educators strike for improved pay and conditions**

Close to 1,400 National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) members at the University of Melbourne (UoM) will stop work from 12 p.m. to 7:30 p.m. on August 28 in their long-running dispute with the university over its proposed enterprise agreement.

Faculties have been given the option of extending action until the end of the week. The Melbourne Law School and Faculty of Arts have both voted to extend their strike to September 1.

The strike follows 12 months of negotiations that failed to resolve differences over job security, workload, flexible working arrangements, the limiting of university restructures and wage rise demands. NTEU is demanding a 15 percent pay increase over three years, or an increase in line with the consumer price index plus 1.5 percent. The members last pay increase was 2.2 percent in 2021.

In June, UoM offered a 6 percent pay rise but wanted to take the money out of employees’ existing salary packages by tapping their superannuation. The offer was rejected with the union saying it was bizarre. The deal sacrificed workers’ retirement savings while costing the university nothing.

The industrial action comes after a run of court cases over

underpayment of staff, with back payments exceeding \$45 million and more expected. The university has also been accused by the Fair Work Ombudsman of expressly or tacitly authorising fake logs of work hours in a bid to drive their underpayments down.

### **New Zealand medical lab workers hold third national strike**

Workers at Awanui Labs, the largest private laboratory provider in New Zealand, began full strike action on Thursday and Friday and will continue Monday and Tuesday next week. Pickets have been held in Invercargill, Dunedin, Christchurch, Nelson, and Wellington.

It is the third round of strikes since the APEX union began talks with Awanui over pay. The company has offered \$3,500 on all base salaries for a one-year deal, which for scientists at the top of the salary scale is a decrease from the previous 5 percent offer and fails to meet pay parity with current rates in public sector laboratories.

Laboratory technicians earn a starting salary of \$22.70 an hour while those who have trained for several years earn \$28 an hour and scientists earn between \$25.65 and \$38.37. Apex is asking for a wage increase of around 23.5 percent for scientists, technicians and phlebotomists.

Behind the current issue is the privatisation of the health system's public hospital laboratories which began under the former Labour government's health minister Pete Hodgson (2005–07). Awanui accounts for more than 70 percent of medical laboratory testing across the country. The company has more than \$700 million worth of public contracts and last year paid a \$43 million dividend to its shareholders.

### **New Zealand senior doctors vote to strike over pay**

Senior doctors and dentists working in New Zealand hospitals have voted to strike next month over deadlocked pay negotiations.

The Association of Salaried Medical Specialists said 82 percent have voted in support of the three strikes, with the first on September 5 between 12 p.m. and 2 p.m. That will be followed by another two-hour strike on September 13 and the third will be a four-hour strike on September 21.

The union's executive director, Sarah Dalton, said senior clinicians have either had no pay rise at all, or below-inflation pay rises since 2020. On top of two years of the government's public sector pay "restraint," an offer from Te Whatu Ora Health NZ amounted to a real pay cut of 11 percent, Dalton said.

The union is claiming an increase of 7–8 percent across 12 months, and some changes to salary steps to fix an overlap between advanced trainees and earlier career senior medical doctors, as well as providing progression for those already on the top band.

Labour Prime Minister Chris Hipkins responded to the union's announcement by demanding doctors "get back around the bargaining table to find a way forward."



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