

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: Rajasthan ambulance workers strike for better pay and rights

About 6,000 ambulance workers employed by EMRI-GHS, a private company that runs the government's 108 and 104 emergency ambulance services in Rajasthan state, have been on strike since September 1. Over 1,300 ambulances with two drivers and two paramedics are off the road.

Strikers are maintaining protests in Jaipur, the state capital, to demand the government transition their employment status to contractual positions and end the prevailing middleman system known as the "thekedar tradition." A striker told the media that EMRI-GHS is paid hundreds of thousands of rupees per ambulance per month to cover fuel, maintenance and other expenses. The drivers, however, are only paid a paltry 8,000 rupees (\$US96) per month.

The workers' want to be put in the regular employment category and for increased job security and wages under contract labour law. Two rounds of talks with the government have failed to reach a consensus.

Odisha public school teachers protest for better pay and conditions

The Odisha Secondary School Teachers' Association held a demonstration of thousands of teachers in Bhubaneswar on Tuesday (Teachers' Day) to demand equal pay for equal work, pension, and other service benefits. Protesters wore black badges during the protest.

Teachers are worried about their future after retirement, as they do not have any pension benefits. They also demand that the government provide funds to unaided schools and implement the recommendations of the Seventh Pay Commission.

The protest was in response to false assurances from the Odisha government that workers' demands will be considered but citing financial restrictions for delaying immediate resolution.

Public transport workers in Uttar Pradesh threaten to strike

On September 2, workers from the Uttar Pradesh State Road Transport Corporation (UPSRTC), the largest public transport provider in the state, will hold a state-wide strike on September 27 if their long-pending demands are not met. Protesting bus drivers and conductors blocked the

regional manager's office in Lucknow and handed over a 25-point memorandum demanding immediate redressal of the demands.

Workers want permanency for contract drivers and conductors, a 14 percent salary increase and uniformity in wages for all UPSRTC employees, irrespective of their category. UPSRTC workers have been protesting for several years over these demands.

Around 34,000 contractual drivers and conductors in the state fall under four categories in UPSRTC: excellent, eminent, general category and special zone. Of these around 18,000 are conductors and 15,000 are drivers. According to the union, only 9,000 are permanent staff of which 3,000 are conductors and 6,000 are drivers.

University teachers in Haryana protest low pay and lack of promotions

Pandit Lakhmi Chand State University of Performing and Visual Arts (PLSUPVA) teachers in Rohtak, Haryana, have been protesting for 120 days, demanding fair pay and promotions on par with the University Grants Commission (UGC) standards. Teachers complained that they have been waiting since 2014 for the implementation of Seventh Pay Commission recommendation regarding salaries, allowances, promotions, and other remunerations.

They claim that they are facing harassment in response to their actions, including show cause notices and being kept out of important decision-making bodies. They claimed the university's administration is ignoring their demands.

Haryana rural social health workers' strike enters fifth week

Over 20,000 ASHA (Accredited Social Health Activist) workers in Haryana have been on strike since August 8 to demand better working conditions, higher pay and permanent jobs. The strike has been met with repression from the Haryana government, with leaders of the strike arrested and detained.

The ASHA workers are frontline health employees who play a vital role in the delivery of healthcare services in rural areas. They provide home-based care to pregnant women, mothers, and children, as well as monitoring the health of the community.

The workers have been demanding a number of improvements to their working conditions, including a fixed salary, regular increments, and insurance benefits. They have also been demanding that the government provide them with adequate training and resources to carry out their work effectively.

These workers have not had a pay rise since 2018, despite their workload increasing three-fold due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Asha Workers Union Haryana State Committee declared that the strike and demonstrations will continue till September 11.

Bangladeshi police arrest protesting railway workers

Police baton charged and arrested 23 contract workers from the Bangladesh Railway who demonstrated on Sunday demanding their jobs be made permanent. Protesting contract and temporary workers blocked the rail line at Malibagh crossing in Dhaka for over four hours, suspending rail journeys from Dhaka to the rest of the country.

Demands included reinstatement of temporary worker jobs, an end to outsourcing of jobs and easing of the 2020 recruitment rule minimum educational requirement at Class V for fourth-grade employees. There are about 20,000 vacancies, according to the government.

Protesters accused railway authorities of breaking a commitment to make them permanent within three to four years. They had held several meetings with the railway minister, railway secretary and other railway authorities.

On July 16, contract workers blocked tracks at the FDC railway gate of Dhaka over the same demands. They suspended the protest after accepting false promises from the railway's general manager.

Cleanaway waste collection workers in New South Wales strike over wages and conditions

Workers from the Cleanaway Liquid Waste Services depot at Padstow, a suburb in Sydney's inner west, walked off the job for 24 hours on September 1 in opposition to the company's attempt to reduce wages and conditions in its proposed enterprise agreement. The strike by 13 members of the Transport Workers Union (TWU) had the potential of restricting services to major retailers including Coles, McDonalds, Ampol and KFC.

The action followed strikes by hundreds of Cleanaway waste collection workers in most state capital cities across Australia this year in opposition to the company's proposed agreement which are a direct attack on its workers' current conditions and pay. The TWU is negotiating for new agreements at Cleanaway depots nationwide.

The company is proposing sub-inflation wage rises and wants roster changes that would cut overtime payments with forced weekend work on less pay, paving the way for Cleanaway to extend its depots to 24 hours, seven days a week operations with a cheaper workforce. According to the TWU, previously agreed quality of life provision is under attack, and health and safety would be reduced.

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.

Cleanaway depots are all covered by separate agreements. The TWU has kept each dispute isolated and dragged out the disputes by minimising strike action to between 24 and 48 hours to minimise their effect, while appealing to Labor politicians and local councils to put pressure on Cleanaway to reach agreement.

Melbourne commuter train workers vote in strike action ballot

Rail Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) members, including train drivers, station staff, authorised officers, signallers and other rail operations staff from commuter transport provider Metro Trains Melbourne, will vote at the end of September regarding future industrial action.

Workers have twice rejected Metro's sub-inflation wage rise offers put to them during negotiations. Industrial action could include a ban on overtime and unlimited 48-hour stoppages.

The RTBU has been trying to reach a deal with Metro for a new agreement since negotiations began in March. Metro's latest wage offer was for 4 percent annual increases in a four-year agreement, well below the current annual inflation rate of 5.6 percent for Melbourne.

The last pay increase was 2.5 percent in January, a real pay cut. Workers want pay rises in line with cost-of-living pressures and job security as new ticketing and signalling systems are rolled out.

While RTBU members are voting for strike action, the RTBU is assuring business and the Labor government that sufficient notice would be provided to minimise the impact of any industrial action.

Mint My Desk and MillionLife workers in Brisbane strike in wage dispute

About a dozen workers from Mint My Desk (desk stationary retailer) and MillionLife (arcade entertainment machines) walked off the job in Brisbane on the morning of September 2, accusing the employers of underpaying staff, not paying superannuation and not providing pay slips. Workers demanded to be paid under the General Retail Award Industry, back pay and pay slips to be provided.

Mint My Desk (MMD) has 18 stores nationally, while MillionLife has 31 stores with plans to expand to 300 stores in the next three years.

Louisa McCarthy from Mint My Desk Workers United said most staff were paid cash in hand with no pay slip. "The minimum wage is not met, penalty rates aren't paid, super isn't paid," she said. Many workers at the stores are young casuals and university students working their first job.

Some staff told the media that they are paid as low as \$18 an hour. The minimum retail award wage is \$24.73 for a full time or part time employed adult. She alleged that casuals were not paid the 25 percent loading in accordance with the industry award. McCarthy said there had been multiple attempts to bring up these issues with the employer with no response.

EDI Rail maintenance workers in New South Wales strike for improved pay offer

Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) members employed by EDI Rail/PPP Maintenance at Downer facilities in Auburn (Sydney) and Newcastle Light Rail walked off the job for 24 hours on August 30 to demand an improved enterprise agreement offer.

The union wants annual pay increases in the three-year agreement of only 5.5 percent, 4.5 percent and 4.5 percent, while the annualised CPI rate for the June quarter was 6.6 percent for Sydney, 7.5 percent for food and 8.1 percent for housing.

It also wants allowances indexed to wage increases, retention of dispute settlement procedures, pandemic leave, upgrade of the shunters'

classification and improved sick leave arrangements. The new agreement will cover a total of about 90 workers at Auburn and Newcastle.

Electricians' union at Evoenergy in Canberra drags out pay dispute into its sixth week

The Electrical Trades Union (ETU) covering 150 workers from the partially state-owned power utility Evoenergy in the Australian Capital Territory has been calling limited industrial action since July 25 in an attempt to reach a deal with the company for a new work agreement.

Industrial action has consisted of one-hour ad hoc stoppages and rallies designed to attract media attention while making useless appeals for the territory's Labor government to intervene on behalf of the workers. The eagerness of workers to take concrete industrial action was expressed in early July when 90 percent voted for taking unlimited consecutive strike action of 8 hours duration.

Workers rejected the company's latest sub-inflation pay increase offer of 9.5 percent over three years, well below Canberra's CPI rate of 5.8 percent. Workers accepted a sub-inflation pay rise in their last agreement for higher superannuation pay.

Evoenergy is now refusing to pay above the federal government's superannuation guarantee of 12 percent. Workers are determined to fight for pay increases that reflect inflation and for the 1.5 percent superannuation increase that other workers across the nation will receive over the next three years.

Responding to pressure from workers, the union has called bans on "switching," which is where power is disconnected from poles and wires to conduct maintenance. This will cause some delay in maintenance work.

Industrial action by Darebin City Council nurses in Victoria enters 14th week

Low-level industrial action by 30 Australian Nurses and Midwives Federation (ANMF) members from Darebin City Council (DCC), in Melbourne's northern suburbs, has entered its 14th week. Nurses are in dispute with the council over its proposed enterprise agreement (EA).

Negotiations between the federation and the council began in September last year. Maternal and child health and immunisation nurses rejected several proposed agreements and in May began industrial action that included several one-hour stoppages and rallies at council offices and wearing red campaign t-shirts and stopping work to discuss their action with the public.

DCC has put a revised offer to nurses for a vote. The ANMF directed its members to reject the offer, claiming it still did not include a "fair" pay rise or improved conditions. The nurses have not had a pay increase since July 2021.

DCC originally wanted 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. Council rejected any increases to allowances or to provide time during work for required education.

The ANMF is demanding a sub-inflation pay increase that is only slightly better than the council's offer. The union wants the agreement 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 percent increase or \$45

per week from 1 July 2023 and 3.2 percent increase or \$45 per week from 1 July 2024. This would be a pay cut considering the consumer price index in Melbourne is 5.6 percent while gas and electricity prices are up by 25 and 15 percent respectively.

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

The ANMF has isolated the nurses, not only from the support of other workers at DCC, but from tens of thousands of other ANMF members employed in the Victorian public health system.

DP World stevedores in Australia vote on taking industrial action

Members of the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA), a division of the Construction Forestry Maritime Mining and Energy Union (CFMMEU), at DP World container terminals at Brisbane, Sydney, Melbourne and Fremantle (Perth), are currently voting on taking industrial action.

Negotiations for a new agreement covering the four ports began in April but after 90 hours of talks no agreement was reached. According to a union, the company wants to cut wages by up to 32 percent. The union claimed it is seeking pay increases that keep pace with the CPI, which currently the national average is 6 percent. Voting by about 1,800 MUA members in the protected action ballot closes on September 26.

New Zealand Warehouse retail workers walk out

Workers at two large Warehouse stores in Auckland and Palmerston North walked off the job on September 1 in an initial strike action seeking a "living wage" and safer staffing levels in stores. The stoppage, from 2 p.m. to 4 p.m., was accompanied by protests outside Warehouse facilities in Catherine Plaza, Henderson and West End, Palmerston North.

The First Union is in bargaining with the company following the expiry of a 2-year Collective Agreement. Union members are currently voting on ratification of the company's pay offer. From among 1,400 workers only two nationwide have voted to accept the pay offer.

The Warehouse has offered less than the trade union-promoted "living wage," in fact a woefully inadequate \$26 per hour, and a pay rise below the rising cost of living. The union declared it wants to "solve these problems through the bargaining process" but complains that top executives are only interested in the "bottom line" and "poisoned negotiations from the start."



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