

# 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: Rural health workers in Haryana extend ongoing strike into October

Over 20,000 ASHA (Accredited Social Health Activist) workers in Haryana state have been on strike since August 8 demanding better working conditions, higher pay and permanent jobs.

In the face of government repression, police attacks and arrests of union leaders, the ASHA Workers Union-Haryana announced on Monday that it would extend the strike to October 10 unless its demands are met. The government responded by “inviting” the union to enter talks on September 29.

The union wants improved working conditions, including a fixed monthly salary of 26,000 rupees (\$US313), regular increments, insurance benefits, and adequate training and resources to carry out their work effectively.

ASHA workers are currently paid an honorarium of between 7,000 and 9,000 rupees a month, which includes incentives. The workers have not had a pay rise since 2018, despite their workload increasing three-fold due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Gurgaon municipal cleaners protest new contracts

About 32 cleaning (Safai) workers from the Gurgaon Municipal Corporation (GMC), in Haryana, held a series of hunger strikes on September 27 to oppose the new contract proposed by the corporation. Workers claimed that the contract would result in job losses for close to 3,500 contract cleaning workers due to contractors hiring other labour. GMC warned that workers would face pay cuts if they failed to return to work. Workers want to be made permanent with wages paid on time.

## Sanitation workers in Bihar remain on strike

Contract sanitation workers from the Patna Municipal Corporation, in Bihar state, have been on strike since September 21 with over 30 demands including a pay raise and permanent jobs. Their current monthly wage is only about 8,000 rupees (\$US96) to 10,000 rupees. They want between 18,000 to 20,000 rupees a month.

The workers are part of the Swach Bharath Scheme, a sanitation program introduced by the Modi government which has begun taking disciplinary action against the strikers.

## Retail workers in Kerala hold state-wide protests for better wages and conditions

Kerala Shops and Commercial Establishments Employees Federation members held state-wide protests from September 18 to 26 to demand the minimum wage, regulated working hours, and social welfare measures. The federation opposes the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led Modi government big business policies including the 100 percent foreign direct investment (FDI) in the retail industry.

The federation wants incomes tied to the minimum wage, aid to workers affected by development projects, job security, and assistance distributed through the welfare board.

Retail workers face multiple challenges, including the erosion of rights and benefits due to the codification of labour laws in which they are deprived of assured minimum wages, regulated work time, gratuity, and bonuses.

Workers want legal guarantees for inclusion in the Employees State Insurance and Provident Fund (PF). With several development projects underway in Kerala, workers are at risk of losing their jobs and are calling on the state government to provide financial assistance to affected workers.

## Sri Lankan academic educators protest over tax increases and excessive workloads

Hundreds of academics and non-academics from 17 universities, represented by 46 trade unions, demonstrated across the island on Monday to demand the Wickremesinghe government withdraw its proposed heavy interest rates on superannuation withdrawal. Protesters claimed the move will deprive workers of their full retirement funds.

The Federation of University Teachers' Associations and non-academic unions university teachers opposed the government's universities restructuring policies and said they threaten the free education system. They want university academic staff increased from 6,500 to more than 15,000 and said that academics are overburdened and their students are suffering from the huge gap in the student-teacher ratio.

### **Sri Lankan postal workers protest rising workloads and cost of living**

All Ceylon Postal and Telegraph Workers Union members demonstrated in several cities across the country on Monday to oppose the increasing cost of living and excessive workloads. They protested outside their respective post offices including the Colombo Central Post Exchange. Demonstrations were held at Galle in the Southern Province, Kandy in Central Province, Anuradhapura in North Central Province and Trincomalee in the Eastern Province.

### **Bangladeshi tea garden workers in Sylhet demand outstanding wages**

Hundreds of tea garden workers demonstrated on September 23 in Sylhet to demand unpaid wages. They blocked the Goabari Road for two hours at 11 a.m. outside the Jalalabad Ragib-Rabeya medical college hospital. They also want the leasing of garden land for the construction of shops to be stopped.

Police intervened and arranged a discussion between the workers, Panchayet Committee and tea garden authorities. A Panchayet Committee spokesman told reporters that the tea garden authorities had not paid salary arrears that had been approved by the prime minister in August 2022.

### **Bega Group dairy processing workers in New South Wales strike**

Bega Group dairy processing plant workers at Penrith, in Sydney's west, began indefinite strike action on Sunday. United Workers Union (UWU) members are in dispute with the company over its proposed enterprise agreement. Last week, the workers voted to take industrial action for a decent pay increase after accepting a union sell-out deal in 2020 to rollover their previous agreement with a low pay increase to help the company through the COVID-19 pandemic.

The current agreement expired on June 30. Their last pay increase was only 3 percent on 1 July 2022. Inflation at the time was 7.8 percent. Pay increases for 2020 and 2021 were only 1.5 percent for each year, representing a real pay cut.

Workers want a 7 percent pay rise in the first year and 5 percent in the years following. Bega has offered only 4 percent in the first year and 3.75 in subsequent years in the three-year agreement. The offer represents another real pay cut when compared to Sydney's consumer prices index rate for the June quarter of 6.6 percent.

### **WICET port terminal workers in Queensland begin industrial action**

Sixteen port workers employed at the Wiggins Island Coal Export Terminal (WICET) in Gladstone, Queensland, began protected industrial action on Tuesday in their dispute for a pay increase. The Mining and Energy Union (MEU), a division of the Construction Forestry Maritime Mining and Energy Union, claimed the workers are the lowest paid coal terminal workers in Queensland. It claimed they are paid 20 percent less than workers at a neighbouring coal terminal.

WICET is owned by some of the largest mining companies who operate

in Queensland and globally. MEU has not given details of its claims except to say that workers are fighting for an agreement that keeps up with the pace of the cost of living and closes the gap with other coal export terminal workers.

### **EnerSys electricians in Victoria still on strike after ten weeks**

Fourteen Electrical Trades Union (ETU) members at the EnerSys Thomastown battery manufacturing facility in Melbourne's northern suburbs are maintaining a strike they began on July 26. The workers are in dispute with the company over its proposed enterprise agreement.

The strikers are maintaining a protest outside the factory. In a provocative move management ordered other employees in the factory to dump the strikers' tools on the footpath outside the factory gates, damaging toolboxes in the process. Management is also not allowing strikers back on site to retrieve their personal items.

The ETU claimed its EnerSys members are the lowest paid in the industry and is calling for inflation-level pay increases and improved conditions. The current agreement expired in March and the workers have not had a pay increase since April last year, which was only 2 percent, well below the inflation rate at the time of over 7 percent.

The ETU has isolated the strikers and allowed EnerSys to maintain production. The union holds a "Speaker's Day" each Wednesday inviting Labor politicians and union dignitaries to address the workers and appeal to the public to send emails to EnerSys demanding negotiations with the union recommence.

### **Firefighters in Victoria demonstrate for improved work agreement offer**

More than 1,500 firefighters from Fire and Rescue Victoria (FRV) marched in Melbourne on September 21 to oppose the state Labor government's refusal to ratify previously agreed provisions in a new enterprise agreement.

The United Firefighter Union (UFU) wants a new agreement to include annual pay rises of 8.6 percent to compensate for inflation and for a Firefighters Registration Board that would give the union power to decide who could be employed in operational roles.

FRV had offered wage increases of just 3 percent, in line with the government's 3 percent wage increase cap for Victoria's public sector workers, and a one-off payment of \$7,000. This would have meant an effective pay cut when compared to inflation. Firefighters rejected the offer.

UFU members had already approved taking protected industrial action to secure their demands but in an attempt to avoid industrial action, the union has applied for arbitration of the dispute in the Fair Work Commission. The UFU claimed this would test whether previously agreed matters can be enforced.

### **Menzies Aviation ground workers in Brisbane strike for pay rise**

About 20 cargo handling workers from Menzies Aviation at Brisbane Airport stopped work for 12 hours on Thursday and 9 hours on Friday to

demand a pay increase. Menzies provides cargo services to United Airlines, Qatar, Air Canada, Cathay Pacific and Eva Air.

Transport Workers Union (TWU) members said they are being paid \$6,000 a year less than counterparts in Sydney and Melbourne and are demanding pay parity. They voted unanimously on September 19 to approve taking protected industrial action, which includes unlimited 24-hour stoppages.

### **Mental health nurses in Tasmania stop work for better pay and conditions**

Hobart's Repatriation Centre and Millbrook Rise Mental Hospital nurses stopped work for a short period on September 22 and protested outside their facilities holding signs saying "HACSU nurses deserve better" and "Pay us like we are essential."

The nurses are members of the Health and Community Services Union (HACSU) which accused the state Liberal government of stalling on negotiations for a new enterprise agreement. Nurses want a pay increase that recognises their essential service and addresses retention and recruitment issues. Another demand is to be paid Sunday penalty rates on par with other public sector workers.

### **Services Australia public servants to strike for higher pay**

The Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) on Thursday notified the federal Labor government that its Services Australia members, which has a 32,000-strong workforce, will strike for 24 hours on October 9. The strike could affect welfare, health insurance and pharmaceutical benefits services.

The action follows rejection of the government's latest pay offer of 11.2 percent over its proposed three-year enterprise agreement. CPSU members are also opposing cuts to conditions such as rights to nominate start and finish times and lunch breaks. Workers want a 20 percent pay rise over three years. The government has offered 4 percent, 3.8 percent in the second year and 3.4 percent in the third year.

After rejecting the government's initial pay offer in August, CPSU members at Centrelink, which processes welfare payments, imposed a two-week ban on the agency's "auxiliary codes," which require members to complete codes so management can track their movements and tasks. That action was followed by a one-hour strike on August 15 demanding an improved pay offer.

Monday's 24-hour strike will be the first to affect customers, with the previous work bans only disrupting management.

### **Canberra Hospital health professionals walk out over low pay**

Health Services Union (HSU) members employed as Radiation Therapists and Perfusionists at the Canberra Hospital, in the Australian Capital Territory, walked off the job on September 21 over low pay. Workers claim that low wages have led to the 19 skilled professionals to Queensland out of a workforce of 50.

HSU members are maintaining low-level work bans implemented on August 4 when negotiations for a new enterprise agreement stalled.

Workers warned that unless the territory's Labor government makes a genuine pay offer soon the service there will be more job losses.

### **Qantas regional pilots in Western Australia and Queensland vote to strike**

Over 470 pilots from Qantas regional subsidiaries that service fly in, fly out (FIFO) workers in Western Australia and passenger services in Queensland have given approval for the Australian Federation of Air Pilots (AFAP) to commence industrial action for new enterprise agreements.

About 366 pilots at QantasLink which runs regional passenger services in NSW, Victoria, Queensland and South Australia, and 210 Network Aviation pilots in Western Australia endorsed taking industrial action in a ballot on September 25. Protected action options range from bans on wearing the prescribed uniform to bans on overtime, to 24-hour stoppages.

Qantas controls 42 percent of the FIFO market in WA and 17 percent in Queensland, which means any action by pilots could have a flow-on effect in Queensland's mining industry and LNG production in Western Australia.

An AFAP spokesman said Network Aviation pilots are paid significant lower wages than pilots in comparable airlines. He claimed negotiations for a new agreement have stalled since Qantas remains unwilling to revisit its inflexible wages policy instituted under the former CEO.

Network Aviation's put its sub-inflation pay offer to workers this week for a vote. It includes a 13 to 20 percent pay increase from mid-October, 3 percent annual increases and increased rostered days off to nine per roster. As an incentive, Network is offering bonuses totalling \$7,000 if pilots accept the proposed agreement.

### **City of Whittlesea workers in Victoria strike for increased wages**

Over 200 Australian Services Union (ASU) members from the City of Whittlesea, in the outer northern suburbs of Melbourne, began a week of industrial action on Monday in opposition to the low pay offer in the city's proposed enterprise agreement. Management's sub-inflation annual pay offer in a three-year agreement is 3.3, 2.1 and 2.1 percent. Well below the June annualised CPI rate for Melbourne of 5.6 percent.

ASU members started action on Monday with low level work bans implemented by indoor and outdoor staff that escalated into a 24-hour strike on Thursday.



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