Workers Struggles: Asia and Australia

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

India: Patna city sanitation workers' strike enters third week

Strike action by 8,000 contract sanitation workers from the Patna Municipal Corporation in Bihar state is now in its third week. The low-paid workers stopped work on September 21 over 30 demands including a pay rise 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.

Many of the strikers have worked on below poverty wages for more than ten years hoping for a permanent job. The workers are part of the Swach Bharath Scheme, a sanitation program introduced by the Modi government, which is now taking disciplinary action against the strikers.

Odisha rural health care workers strike for pay rise and pensions

Thousands of rural health care (anganwadi) workers in Odisha state are on indefinite strike in the state capital Bhubaneswar over poverty wages and inadequate retirement pensions. The All Odisha Anganwadi Ladies Workers Association want their current monthly wage of 7,500 rupees ($US90) increased to at least 18,000 and Anganwadi assistants from 3,700 rupees a month to 9,000 rupees.

They also want permanent jobs, the retirement age raised to 65, retirement funds increased to 500,000 rupees ($6,000), and establishment of an Anganwadi Workers and Assistant Welfare Board.

An association spokesman said that even after working for up to 40 years, Anganwadi workers lead a miserable life in retirement. Despite helping the government in all kinds of field activities and basic anganwadi duties, the salary is less than that of a daily labourer.

Haryana government deregisters union at Bellsonica's Manesar auto-parts factory

The Trade Union Registrar of Haryana, following a request from company management, has cancelled the registration of the Bellsonica workers' union at the auto-parts factory in Manesar for allegedly extending union rights to outsourced contract workers.

In making its decision, the state government referred to a section of the Trade Union Act 1926 which says that only workers employed directly by the company are eligible for union membership. The plant has 700 permanent employees and approximately 1,600 contract workers.

Bellsonica current and former employees protested the decision on September 27 in Gurgaon. They were joined by Maruti Suzuki factory workers. The matter is currently pending in the Punjab and Haryana high court.

Retrenched General Motors India workers in Pune on hunger strike

About 1,000 retrenched workers from General Motors India's shuttered plant at Telegaon near Pune in Maharashtra state, began an indefinite hunger protest on Monday. Workers are demanding reinstatement at the plant which has been sold to Hyundai Motor India.

The General Motors Employees Union (GMEU) said it had called on the Maharashtra state government to intervene. Workers complained that despite several assurances the state industries minister has done nothing.

Protesting Tamil Nadu teachers arrested in Chennai

Chennai police arrested striking members of three teachers' unions on early Thursday morning. The teachers were demonstrating outside the Directorate of Public Instructions premises where many government institutions are located. The arrest came hours after the education minister promised to look into the teachers' demands.

Hundreds of teachers have been protesting and holding a hunger strike at the site for over a week. They want equal pay for equal jobs, job permanency and withdrawal of repressive government laws.

Bangladesh: Garment workers demonstrate to demand pay rise

Hundreds of garment workers protested outside the minimum wages board office in Dhaka on Sunday to demand a wage increase. The Garment Workers Alliance representing 11 trade unions in the garment sector want the minimum monthly wage raised to between 23,000 and 25,000 taka ($US209–$227) from the current $73. They also want a 10 percent annual increment and grade restructures reduced from seven to five.

Garment factory owners are dragging out negotiations and not making a pay increase offer. A factory owners' representative said the new wage hike would not come into effect until January 2024.

The current minimum monthly wage for garment workers is 8,000 taka ($72.55) which was established at the end of 2018. The government and factory owners are determined to keep Bangladeshi garment workers' minimum wages below the poverty wages of garment workers in competing countries.

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According to the Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies the minimum wage for garment workers is $307 in Turkey, $262 in China, $250 in Malaysia, $244 in the Philippines, $194 in Cambodia, $168 in Vietnam, $137 in Indonesia and $128 in India.

QantasLink pilots in Western Australia strike for higher pay

Over 200 pilots from Network Aviation, a Qantas Group subsidiary in Western Australia under the QantasLink banner, stopped work for 24 hours on Wednesday. Qantas was forced to cancel half its regional flights across the state, affecting about 3,500 passengers and fly-in/fly-out mining and LNG production workers.

The Australian Federation of Air Pilots (AFAP), covering 211 pilots employed by Network Aviation and 266 at Qantaslink, is in dispute with the two Qantas subsidiaries over Qantas' proposed enterprise agreement. AFAP members voted on September 25 to take protected industrial action that ranged from bans on wearing the prescribed uniform, bans on overtime and 24-hour stoppages.

An AFAP spokesman said Network Aviation pilots are paid up to 50 percent lower wages than pilots in comparable airlines and in some cases are paid below the Air Pilots Award. AFAP wants pay parity with Qantas mainline pilots. Qantas claimed it has offered an immediate 25 percent pay increase and that AFAP's demands were unreasonable.

Network Aviation pilots last week rejected a sub-inflation pay offer which included a 13 to 20 percent pay increase from mid-October, 3 percent annual increases and increased rostered days off to nine per roster. They were offered bonuses totalling $7,000 if they accepted the proposed agreement. Pilots report that Qantas had sent "threatening letters" indicating they would lose established conditions if they did not accept the offer.

Negotiations for a new agreement have been at a standstill since March. Both sides agreed to resume negotiations next week.

Cadbury chocolate factory workers in Tasmania strike

Close to 400 Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) members from Cadbury's Claremont factory in Tasmania have begun a campaign of ongoing industrial action, including four one hour-long stoppages each fortnight as they push for an improved pay offer in the company's proposed enterprise agreement.

The workers voted near unanimously in June to take strike action after rejecting Cadbury's below inflation wage increase offer of 13 percent over three years. The Tasmania consumer price index (CPI) in June was 5.5 percent, meaning a pay increase below 16.5 percent would be a real pay cut. The union has already indicated that it would accept annual pay increases of only 5 percent.

The workers last pay rise was just 2.75 percent in March 2022, at a time when inflation was around 7 percent. Other demands are for improved sick leave, increased income protection and job security for casual and part time workers.

Cadbury's parent company, Mondelez International, a transnational food and beverage company, reported a turnover of $US26 billion last financial year with a net profit of $2.7 billion.

Coles and Woolworths supermarket workers hold national stoppage

Close to 700 Coles and Woolworths supermarket workers will walk off the job for two hours at 10 a.m. on October 7 in their first ever nationally coordinated strike. The workers are members of the Retail and Fast Food Workers Union (RAFFWU) which has a membership of 413 at Coles' stores and 276 at Woolworths stores.

A RAFFWU spokesman said members were fighting for living wages, safer workplaces and secure jobs. He said these workers are paid only a few cents more than the minimum wage and casual workers want ongoing jobs with more hours in their contracts.

Union members imposed 13 bans on Friday, including refusal to crush cardboard boxes, clean toilets, pack online orders and clear loose stock left on the floor or registers. Coles threatened RAFFWU members that refusing to perform duties banned by the union will not be paid, even if they do other work. The union claimed that management warned members that they risked termination if they took part in the two-hour stoppage.

The Shop, Distributive and Allied Employees Association (SDA), which holds the majority membership of the combined workforce of the two supermarket chains of about 150,000, has collaborated with management for decades to impose low pay and poor conditions. It has not called upon its members to participate in the action.

Coles declared a $1.1 billion net profit for financial year 2022–23, while Woolworths recorded a net profit of $1.5 billion.

Cleanaway waste collection workers at Padstow, New South Wales hold second strike

Transport Workers Union (TWU) members from the Cleanaway Liquid Waste Services depot at Padstow, an inner-west Sydney suburb, walked off the job for 24 hours on September 29 in opposition to the company's proposed enterprise agreement. The 13 workers earlier walked off on September 1, accusing Cleanaway of attempting to reduce wages and conditions in its proposed agreement. The strikes restricted services to major retailers including Coles, McDonalds, Ampol and KFC.

The TWU is negotiating new agreements at Cleanaway depots which has contracts with 130 local councils and 150,000 business customers across Australia. It runs 5,000 waste collection trucks. Cleanaway depots are all covered by separate agreements.

The Padstow workers action followed strikes by hundreds of Cleanaway waste collection workers in most state capital cities this year in opposition to the company's proposed cost-cutting agreements. The TWU has kept each dispute isolated and dragged them out by minimising strike action to between 24 and 48 hours.

CSL pharmaceutical factory workers in Victoria strike for pay rise

Over 60 maintenance workers from the CSL Behring pharmaceutical factory at Broadmeadows, a northern Melbourne suburb, walked off the job for six hours on Wednesday in a dispute over CSL's proposed enterprise agreement. The workers are members of the Electrical Trades Union and the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union who said after 13 rounds of negotiations CSL had failed to make "a fair and reasonable offer."

In a ballot on September 18, workers from both unions unanimously

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approved industrial action, including an unlimited number of work stoppages, ban on working overtime and 12 lower-level work bans. Neither union has made public details of their log of claims or indicated if further industrial action is planned.

Southeast Queensland bus drivers resume strike action for pay rise

Over 500 members of the Transport Workers Union (TWU) employed by three different bus operators in southeast Queensland stopped work for 24 hours on Wednesday as part of their pay dispute. Bus drivers, refuellers and cleaners from Kinetic subsidiaries Surfside in the Gold Coast and Sunbus in the Sunshine Coast, as well as independent operator Clarks Logan City Bus Service, are fighting for a higher pay, improved safety standards and better consultation in new enterprise agreements.

The action followed a 24-hour strike in August and fare-free days, some three days long, in May, June and August. The TWU is negotiating for three separate agreements. Workers want a 7 percent pay rise this year, recruitment of additional drivers and improved driver safety.

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 the drivers' base rate to just $30 an hour, and cleaners/refuellers to just above $23 an hour.

University of Melbourne educators hold second strike for improved pay and conditions

Close to 1,400 National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) members at the University of Melbourne (UoM) walked out for a week-long strike on Monday in their long-running dispute with the university over its proposed enterprise agreement. The action followed a 24-hour strike on August 28, with some faculties extending the strike for a week.

The strike follows over 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. The NTEU is demanding a 15 percent pay rise over three years, or an increase in line with the consumer price index, plus 1.5 percent. The members last pay rise 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 industrial action comes after a run of court cases over underpayment of staff, with back payments exceeding $45 million and more expected.

Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology vocational educators strike again

National Tertiary Educators Union (NTEU) members walked off the job at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) campuses for two days on Thursday in their dispute over the university's proposed enterprise agreement. The action followed a full-day strike on September 15 and a stop-work meeting on September 7 and various work bans.

Educators rejected RMIT's proposed agreement, which included sub-inflation 3.5 percent annual wage rises, extension of the agreement to four years and 13 percent superannuation. RMIT management also wants a new sessional staff category, increased teaching and work hours as well as making changes to classification level testing. Although the annualised CPI for Melbourne is 5.6 percent the NTEU is seeking only a 5 percent pay increase.

A priority claim of NTEU members is for secure employment. About 50 percent of vocational educators are casual and living precariously. Many are forced to take two or more jobs to survive. Recent research by the University of Melbourne's Centre for the Study of Higher Education shows that over the past twenty years, the unions have endorsed agreements with universities that failed to improve job security or the working conditions of casual educational workers.

Stramit steel fabrication factory workers in New South Wales strike

Eight Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) members from the Stramit steel fabrication factory, in Newcastle, north of Sydney, walked off the job for the rest of their shift after holding a lunchtime meeting on Thursday.

Workers are in dispute over Stramit's proposed below inflation enterprise agreement annual pay increase of just 3 percent. The annualised CPI rate for Newcastle is 6.6 percent. This comes after the union and Stramit convinced workers during the COVID-19 pandemic to accept a pay rise of 0 percent, 1.5 percent and 2.5 percent. Workers said their pay rises must keep pace with inflation.

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