

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.

Sri Lankan public sector workers protest unbearable living conditions

Thousands of public sector workers took to the streets on Monday to protest the inadequate living allowance announced in the Wickremesinghe government's 2024 budget. Hundreds of teachers demonstrated outside the education ministry in Battaramulla, a Colombo suburb, to demand a living wage. They were accompanied by members of the All Ceylon Education Non-Academic Employees Union who also demanded promotions and payment of overtime for security workers.

Public sector workers are demanding a minimum of 20,000 rupees (\$US61) as a monthly allowance or an increase in their wages. The State and Provincial Public Service Unions are demanding the 8 percent deduction from their wages announced in the government's 2024 budget be withdrawn.

Development Officers in several cities including Badulla, Anuradhapura and Kandy in Central Province demanded to be absorbed as teachers. Health workers protested in front of the health ministry demanding allowances or salary increases be added to their January salary.

Pakistan: Bakkakhel village administration workers in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province strike

Protesting workers from the Bakkakhel village municipal administration have threatened to lock the offices of the civic body and block roads if they are not paid five months' unpaid salaries up to December 5. Workers demonstrated outside the Bannu Press Club on Wednesday.

Meanwhile, sanitation workers from the Water and Sanitation Services Company (WSSC) continued their strike for the third day on Wednesday against non-payment of two months' salaries. Due to the strike, waste and garbage is piling up in the streets and on roads.

Bangladesh: Impoverished retired Rajshahi Sugar Mill workers demand unpaid entitlements

About 100 retired Bangladeshi sugar mill workers and family members demonstrated at Rajshahi Sugar Mills on November 24 to demand

outstanding payments, including gratuity and provident fund.

Protesters said that over 300 employees have retired from the mill since 2014 and have had miserable lives. One protester said her husband has already passed away. "We could not give him proper treatment due to the financial crisis," adding that their only hope was payment of the gratuity money.

A senior worker who retired in 2020 said, "This gratuity is our last resource for livelihood. We do not have rice in our stomachs. That is why we are demonstrating for gratuity. Many couldn't come due to old age." He was paid just taka 80,000 (\$US726) on retirement. Workers claimed they are owed gratuity up to 1.5 million taka.

India: Punjab government ministerial workers demand restoration of old pension scheme

Punjab government ministerial workers from 50 departments have been on strike since November 8 demanding restoration of the old pension scheme. They also want three outstanding instalments of dearness allowance paid and permanency for contract employees.

On Tuesday, they extended the strike till December 6 after the government failed to initiate talks. The strike is likely to affect the timely disbursement of salaries of over 200,000 state government employees.

BSNL telecommunications workers in Goa protest privatisation

Workers from the state-owned telecommunications provider BSNL held a lunchtime demonstration at Panjim, in Goa state, on Tuesday to protest the government's delay in providing 4G and 5G services. Workers accused the government of favouritism toward private companies, which they said obstructed BSNL's progress in technological advancements.

They argued that there is a growing technological disparity between BSNL and private telecommunication firms. Workers highlighted their dedication to providing reliable network services and conveyed their disappointment regarding the lack of governmental assistance.

Punjab 108 Ambulance contract workers demand permanency

Punjab 108 Ambulance Employees Association members struck on Monday over several demands. Workers want the contract system ended and to be made permanent employees of the state. They complained that

they work 12-hour shifts and have not had a pay increase since 2013. Workers want their monthly salary increased to 35,000 rupees (\$US359), on par with 108 Ambulance workers in Haryana state.

Maharashtra contract health workers' strike enters sixth week

About 4,000 contract health workers employed under the National Health Mission (NHM) at Pune, in Maharashtra state, have been on strike since October 25 demanding permanent appointments, or, at minimum, equal pay and entitlements as permanent employees.

Strikers have been protesting outside the Pune collector's office. Many workers have been in the job for 10 years or more without a pay rise.

Currently there are 35,000 contract NHM workers in Maharashtra, including doctors, nurses, laboratory technicians, pharmaceutical officers, community medical officers and management staff at district hospitals, sub-district hospitals, rural hospitals and primary health centres.

Kerala creche workers protest non-payment of honorarium

Kerala Creche Workers Union (KCWU) members held a protest march in Thiruvananthapuram on November 23 demanding ten months of unpaid honorarium. Federal government grants have not been paid for 22 months, forcing workers to seek donations from the public to keep the creches open.

There are around 220 creches across the state manned by one teacher and a helper. Teachers and helpers receive a meagre monthly honorarium of 4,000 rupees (\$US48) and 2,000 rupees respectively. The union is demanding a minimum honorarium of 15,000 rupees. Other demands include recognition as government employees, leave facilities and social security measures.

Queensland water utility workers strike for better pay

About 30 workers from Utilita Water Solutions at Eagle Farm, southeast Queensland, stopped work and rallied outside their depot on Wednesday for an improved pay offer in the company's proposed enterprise agreement. They also want essential clauses to be included in their agreement around the use of contractors and having apprentices directly employed by the company.

The workers are members of the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) and the Electrical Trades Union (ETU). The AMWU claimed that the company utilises a lot of contractors who are paid at a higher rate.

Utilita Water Solutions (Utilita) is a joint venture between Ventia Utilities and Downer Utilities, contracted to provide infrastructure maintenance services for the state-owned Urban Utilities.

Southeast Queensland bus drivers not collecting fares during pay dispute

Bus drivers on Queensland's Gold Coast, Sunshine Coast and Logan City have not been collecting bus fares for over five weeks. The 400 drivers are members of the Transport Workers Union (TWU) who are demanding their pay be increased to \$35 an hour in new enterprise agreements. The union is also demanding that wages for about 100 cleaners/refuellers be lifted above \$23 an hour.

The drivers are employed on three separate agreements by two Kinetic subsidiaries—Surfside and Sunbus—and Clarks Logan City Bus Service, which are contracted by the state government to operate bus services in Southeast Queensland.

The TWU has accepted the argument from Kinetic and Clarks that they need additional funding from the government to afford pay increases and has made an appeal to the Palaszczuk Labor government to provide extra funds to the operators. Drivers have vowed to continue to make buses fare-free until their demands are met.

BAE Systems electricians in Western Australia locked out

About 70 Electrical Trades Union members were refused entry to BAE Systems' Henderson site in Western Australia on Tuesday after voting to take industrial action in their pay dispute. Workers voted in a ballot to approve taking protected industrial action following six months of failed negotiations between the union and BAE for a new enterprise agreement.

BAE Systems installs and maintains electrical systems for military assets such as fighter aircraft and naval vessels and control systems.

Gas infrastructure workers in Victoria strike for higher pay and a shorter work week

Close to 30 Electrical Trades Union members from the energy distribution provider APA Gasnet walked out for 48 hours on Thursday and rallied outside their depot at Dandenong, a south-eastern Melbourne suburb. The strike followed five months of failed negotiations for a new work agreement between the company and the unions, which include the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union and the Australian Workers Union.

Workers want annual 6 percent wage rises and a 36-hour working week, bringing them in line with other workers in the utility infrastructure industries.

Previous agreements negotiated with APA by the same unions left their members increasingly worse off. In 2021 and 2022 workers received wage rises of just 2 percent and 2.25 percent respectively, raises that were well behind the cost-of-living increases of 3.0 percent in 2021 and 7.3 percent in 2022. The annual consumer price index (CPI) increase for September is 5.4 percent. A wage rise less than this would mean workers having to accept a third real-pay cut.

APA has now admitted to underpaying its workforce over the past seven years a total of \$32 million due to "highly complex agreements" and other administrative issues.

New Zealand nurses begin new campaign for better pay and conditions

New Zealand nurses began a series of stop-work meetings this week as part of a fresh round of campaigning for better pay and conditions. About 40 two-hour paid union meetings are being held for 30,000 members of the NZ Nurses Organisation (NZNO) who work for Te Whatu Ora/Health New Zealand.

NZNO chief executive Paul Goulter said the aim of the meetings was to “put pressure” on the health agency and the new government to increase funding to the sector and fix the nursing shortage. Nurses had made it clear that they expected pay levels to match the cost of living. The incoming right-wing coalition government is preparing to launch deepening attacks on the public health system, including a likely push for increased privatisation.

In August, the NZNO shut down strike action and pushed through a below-inflation wage settlement. Goulter admitted that many members opposed the deal which failed to address the shortage of nurses and was “pretty light” on issues such as health and safety and minimum staff to patient ratios.

A nurse at Wairarapa Hospital, Amber Cox, told Radio NZ that KiwiSaver contributions, allowances, and safe staffing levels are among the things that need to be resolved. “We need to see nurses in charge of shifts getting a higher duties allowance,” she said. “At the moment it’s a discretionary payment and the nurses are not always getting what they are entitled to.” “There aren’t enough nurses anyway,” Cox added. The current collective agreement is in place until October 2024.



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