

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: Maharashtra childcare workers on indefinite strike

Over 200,000 anganwadi (childcare) workers and helpers across Maharashtra began an indefinite strike on Monday over several long outstanding demands. Strikers marched to their respective district and Collectors' offices to submit their demands and then protested outside the winter session of the state legislature in Nagpur.

The Anganwadi Workers Union wants increased honorarium and gratuity payments and for workers to be granted government employee status. They want a minimum wage of 18,000 rupees (\$US216) a month, which is the minimum wage for a government contract worker according to labour laws, and an additional dearness allowance.

One worker told the media that after 17 years of service she is still paid only 10,000 rupees a month and is not entitled to pension, provident fund or gratuity payments. Helpers are paid only 5,000 rupees a month. Anganwadi workers ensure proper nutrition for pregnant women and infants and teach young children to develop cognitive, emotional and language skills.

Punjab public sector workers demand reinstatement of old pension scheme

Workers from the Postgraduate Institute of Medical Education and Research (PGIMER) in Chandigarh held a candlelight march in the city on Monday to demand reinstatement of the old pension scheme. The protest was organised by the All-India National Pension System (NPS) Employee Federation.

Meanwhile, members of the Punjab State Ministerial Services Union (PSMSU) are maintaining strike action that started on November 8 to demand reinstatement of the old pension scheme. Other demands are for the release of outstanding instalments of the dearness allowance and for contract workers to be made permanent. November salaries for Punjab government workers have been delayed.

The old pension scheme for public sector workers was replaced in 2004 with a new contributory scheme by the central government as a cost-saving measure. Under the new scheme workers are paid a pension as per their contributions to the provident fund, which is well below what they would get under the old scheme, which paid a pension based on their last pay drawn.

The new scheme has been criticised for failing to offer financial security

to retired government employees. The skyrocketing cost of living has led to rising nationwide demands for a return to the old scheme.

The strike action was supported by the Punjab State Power Corporation Limited (PSPCL), which went on strike on Tuesday demanding payment of pension arrears and revised salary scale, while health department workers in Amritsar stopped work on Tuesday and protested in support of public sector workers' demands.

Sanitation workers at Gidderbaha in Punjab demand unpaid wages

Municipal sanitation workers at Gidderbaha, in Punjab state, stopped work on November 28 and drove tractor loads of garbage to the sub-divisional magistrate's (SDM) office to demand four months of unpaid wages. They also demanded provision of designated dumping sites, as existing sites had been encroached by private contractors.

A spokesman from the Gidderbaha Sweepers' Union said they had been assured by authorities that their demands will be acted on. They threatened to resume the protest at the SDM office if their demands are not met.

Kerala village bank workers strike over high workload

Village bank employees and officers at Kannur, in Kerala state, held a one-day strike on December 2 to demand permanent jobs for temporary and daily waged workers, and filling of vacant positions to reduce their heavy workload.

Workers accused management of abrogating earlier assurances on their charter of nine demands. In 2016, they held a 10-day strike and a 16-day hunger protest over the same demands. The strike was called by the All India Regional Rural Bank Employees Association (AIRRBEA).

Fishermen at Kochi demand modernisation of fish-landing centre

Traditional fishermen at Kochi, in Kerala, blocked traffic on the Goshree Bridge with a human chain on Tuesday demanding that the government modernise facilities at the Kalamukku fish-landing centre. Fishermen accused the government of not keeping a promise to modernise the facility by 2018.

A spokesman told media that the Kalamukku fish-landing centre port was a haven for thousands of fishermen from Ernakulam and

neighbouring Alappuzha and Thrissur districts, especially during the monsoon season when sea conditions turned rough. The government built the harbour facility in 2011 but failed to build an approach road, leaving the facility idle.

The fishermen are demanding the building of the approach road, dredging of the waters adjacent to the landing centre and expanding the number of landing facilities to provide shelter for boats during rough sea conditions.

Pakistani doctors in government hospitals on strike over sackings

Young Doctors Association (YDA) members from government hospitals in Lahore began an indefinite strike on November 30 to protest the termination and transfer of three doctors and the alleged murder of a doctor in Gujarat city.

YDA is demanding the withdrawal of the termination and transfer of the three doctors and for police action to bring the alleged perpetrators of the murder of the Gujarat doctor to trial. YDA threatened to extend the strike across the province if the government failed to respond to their demands within 48 hours.

Virgin Airlines cabin crews ready to strike for pay rise

Over 1,000 Virgin Airlines cabin crew voted near-unanimously on December 1 to take industrial action to secure a higher pay offer and improved conditions in the airline's proposed enterprise agreement. Approved action could include overtime bans, bans on cleaning cabins and indefinite strikes ranging from 15 minutes to 24 hours.

The Flight Attendants' Association of Australia (FAAA) claimed that Virgin's pay offer failed to lift members' wages above poverty level. The FAAA convinced cabin crew, following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and after Virgin entered voluntary administration in April 2020, to accept a wage freeze and reduced conditions, resulting in workers getting pay increases over five years totalling only 1.98 percent. Members want pay increases that make up for lost wages.

Workers said fatigue and illness are a real problem because unsafe conditions agreed to during the COVID pandemic put them at risk. They want better rostering practices that reduce long shifts and hours and ensure staff have proper breaks and rest time to reduce fatigue.

In October this year Virgin announced a net profit of \$129 million after tax.

Public school cleaners in Victoria protest job losses and outsourcing

About 500 contract cleaners from public schools in Victoria demonstrated outside the offices of the Department of Education and Training in Melbourne on Wednesday over the state Labor government's continued outsourcing of their jobs to private contractors.

The protest was in response to the likelihood that many of the current 700 employees of cleaning contractor ISS Facilities Services could be without a job when ISS ends its contract with the government after six years on December 20. They have no guarantees that they will be reemployed by newly-appointed contractors, Tradeflex and Serco.

The United Workers Union says many of its members have been employed at 214 state schools for more than 25 years, but under the current system jobs are only as safe as the next contract and any wages and conditions above the minimum are at risk. A spokesperson for Tradeflex said the company only intended to employ 220 current ISS workers.

Under the previous UWU-negotiated enterprise agreement, ISS cleaners were already among the lowest-paid workers. They earned just \$47,562 per annum for a full-time level-one worker and \$51,997 for a level-two worker. Serco have indicated they will not maintain existing wages and conditions, saying they intend to drop wages to the industry award minimum and cut the grade-two level and holiday wages, meaning workers will not be paid during the eight-week summer school holiday.

Victorian Country Fire Authority vehicle maintenance workers impose bans

Country Fire Authority (CFA) vehicle maintenance workers in Victoria are maintaining work bans in their dispute for a pay rise in a new work agreement. The workers are members of the Australian Services Union, which has been in negotiations with CFA for a new enterprise agreement for over a year. They have not had a pay rise since their current agreement expired in January 2022.

The mechanics began industrial action in April but limited it to minor bans, such as not doing work covered under warranty or performing modifications on vehicles. Work bans were upgraded on November 29 to include three days of four-hour bans on performance of scheduled and routine maintenance or non-urgent repairs. These same bans were repeated on Wednesday through to Friday.

The CFA has offered a pay rise of 15.5 percent over four years, in keeping with the state Labor annual wage increase cap of 3 percent. The annualised consumer price index (CPI) for Victoria is currently 5 percent, meaning workers are being asked to accept a real pay cut.

Regional public transport rail workers in Victoria to strike

The Rail Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) has notified the state-owned regional public rail transport operator V/Line that its members will strike for four hours at 3 a.m. on December 13. Strikers will include train controllers, station officers, customer service staff and authorised officers. Train drivers are not participating but all V/Line rail services are expected to come to a halt.

The RTBU and V/Line have been in negotiations for a new enterprise agreement since June. The agreement covers over 1,300 RTBU members who on November 29 approved taking strike action up to 48 hours.

The union claimed that V/Line is yet to address key demands that have been raised throughout negotiations. These are for guaranteed regional job security, a grievance clause, a 36-hour week and no forced redundancies. The RTBU wants a 17 percent pay rise over a four-year agreement. The current CPI in Victoria is 5 percent which means the union is negotiating a real pay cut.

The RTBU negotiated real pay cuts in its 2019 agreement with V/Line. Annual pay increases from 2019 were 4, 2 and 2 percent while inflation was 3.8, 7.3 and 5.4 percent respectively. The workers' last pay increase was July 2022.



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