

Workers Struggles: Asia & Australia

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

Asia

India: Andhra Pradesh childcare workers on strike for pay increase and benefits

A statewide strike called by the Anganwadi (childcare) Workers and Helpers Union entered its seventh day on December 18. Workers are holding sit-down protests at Dharna Chowk in Vijayawada and other parts of Andhra Pradesh, demanding that the state government act on orders issued by the Supreme Court directing all state governments to pay gratuity and retirement benefits to anganwadi workers.

Anganwadi workers and helpers marched from the Vijayawada railway station to the Dharna Chowk on Monday holding banners and placards. They said they will continue their struggle until their demands are met.

Karnataka social health workers strike for pay increase

Thousands of Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHA) held a sit-down protest on the premises of the district panchayat (council) at Belagavi, Karnataka, on Monday, demanding their monthly honorarium be increased to 15,000 rupees (\$US180).

A major grievance was that technical issues in the federal government's Reproductive and Child Health portal had caused workers to not be paid thousands of rupees in incentives over the past five years.

The protest was organised by the Karnataka State United ASHA Workers' Association and the All India United Trade Union Centre.

Jharkhand construction workers demand rise in minimum wage

Construction workers covered by the Jharkhand Rajya Nirman Kamgar Union (JRNKU) staged a protest in front of the labour commissioner's office in Jharkhand's capital, Ranchi, on December 19. They demanded simplification of registration rules and a raise in the minimum daily wage to 600 rupees (\$US7). Workers handed a memorandum of their demands to the office staff.

A union representative said due to complicated rules and technical snags workers have to visit the registration office multiple times to complete online registrations and provide additional documents. Around 700 workers had been unable to renew their registration due to the new

regulations.

Temporary bank workers in Kerala demand permanent jobs and wage revision

Workers in the Bank Temporary Employees Federation (BTEF) marched on December 13 to Raj Bhavan in Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, demanding permanent jobs and the implementation of wage revisions as per the 12th Bipartite Settlement recently agreed upon by the United Forum of Bank Unions (UFBU) and Indian Banks Association (IBA).

The other major demands of the BTEF include payment of wages for 30 days per month instead of only on days worked, as well as leave and maternity benefits on a par with permanent employees.

The Federation pointed out that with around 75 percent of temporary workers being women, the lack of maternity leave benefits and other social welfare measures were affecting their livelihoods. The BTEF said the opening of new-generation banks after the introduction of "neo-liberal policies" has given rise to casualisation of workers in the sector. The exploitation was soon followed by the public sector banks introducing casual, daily wage and contract workers in several sections, leading to a decline in permanent jobs.

Punjab government ministerial workers end five-week strike

The Punjab State Ministerial Staff Union (PSMSU) sent its members back to work on Monday, ending their five-week strike. Workers reluctantly accepted the directive, saying that the government had still not agreed to most of their demands.

The workers, from 43 departments, started their strike on November 8 with several major long-pending demands, including reinstatement of the old pension scheme, release of outstanding instalments of the dearness allowance and for contract workers to be made permanent.

The union abruptly shut down the strike after talks with the government in which a deal was done for a 4 percent rise in the dearness allowance only. The union lined up with the government's concern that the strike was causing mass suffering as government services, such as the issuance of various certificates, had been disrupted.

In an attempt to subdue the workers' discontent, the union announced the strike had been temporarily halted and could be resumed if outstanding demands are not met.

Sri Lanka Telecom workers strike against privatisation

Hundreds of members of the Sri Lanka Telecommunication Workers Union went on strike on Tuesday and Wednesday across the nation to oppose the Wickremesinghe government's plan to partially privatise Sri Lanka Telecom.

Strikers protested outside their local government offices in Kandy in Central Province, Wayamba, Eastern Province and Trincomalee in Eastern Province, among others. They held handwritten placards saying "Stop cutting workers' rights" and "Our jobs are at risk." The union threatened that if the government failed to reverse its privatisation plan an indefinite strike would be called.

700 Coles and Woolworths supermarket workers hold national strike

Around 700 Retail and Fast Food Workers Union (RAFFWU) members employed at supermarket giants Coles and Woolworths walked off the job at various times this week in Melbourne, Sydney, Broken Hill, Brisbane and Perth demanding a "living wage" of \$29 per hour, secure jobs and safe workplaces.

Union members at Woolworths in Broken Hill walked out on Tuesday and will not return until after Christmas Day. Members at Coles Banksia Grove and Byford, in Perth, walked out for several hours on Thursday and Friday, respectively, while members from Coles and Woolworths in Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane walked out at midday on Friday.

The action followed a national two-hour strike in October and the imposition of limited work bans, followed by ad hoc stoppages and storefront rallies through the rest of the year. RAFFWU claimed it has over 400 members at Coles stores and nearly 300 at Woolworths, who are paid only a few cents more than the minimum wage. Casual workers want ongoing jobs with more hours in their contracts.

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

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.

While RAFFWU postures as an alternative to the SDA and other more established unions, its role is to contain workers' anger and opposition to their dire pay and conditions, imposed through decades of sell-out union-management deals, within the framework of the union apparatus.

Ventia building maintenance workers in Western Australia strike

Twenty-four building maintenance workers employed by facilities management contractor Ventia walked off the job for 24 hours on December 15 and held a protest rally outside Campbell Barracks in Swanbourne, a suburb of Perth. Members of the Construction Forestry Maritime and Energy Union and Electrical Trades Union voted on December 11 to take protected industrial action after rejecting Ventia's proposed enterprise agreement.

Ventia offered a sub-inflation pay "rise" of 11.1 percent over four years, equivalent to annual increases of only 2.77 percent, while the current annual inflation rate for Perth is 5.8 percent. The workers have not had a pay increase for 18 months.

Victorian Country Fire Authority vehicle maintenance workers extend bans

Country Fire Authority (CFA) vehicle maintenance workers in Victoria have extended existing work bans in their dispute for a pay rise in a new work agreement. The Australian Services Union (ASU) has been in negotiations with CFA for a new enterprise agreement for more than a year. Workers have not had a pay rise since their current agreement expired in January 2022.

The mechanics began industrial action in April but the ASU has kept it restricted to the most limited measures. These bans were upgraded in November to include ongoing blocks of four-hour bans on performance of routine maintenance or non-urgent repairs. The action ended on December 8 while workers waited for CFA to offer a revised agreement.

The ASU claimed on Tuesday that the revised offer was worse than the previous offer and reimposed the four-hour work bans on Wednesday through to Friday and again for Wednesday through to Friday next week.

The CFA originally offered a total pay rise of 15.5 percent over four years which was calculated on the inclusion of a \$4,400 sign-on bonus, in keeping with the state Labor government's 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.

CFA's revised offer increased the sign-on bonus to \$5,000 but withdrew a previously promised "patience in bargaining" payment and removed the Duty Officer public holiday substitute day for new staff.

Emergency call operators in Victoria begin industrial action

Emergency call operators at Victoria's state-funded Emergency Services Telecommunications Authority (ESTA) began a campaign of low level industrial action on Monday in pursuit of increased wages, better conditions and more staffing in ESTA's proposed enterprise agreement (EA).

The 487 workers are covered by four unions, the United Firefighters Union (UFU), Victorian Ambulance Union (VAU), Communications Workers Union (CWU) and the United Workers Union (UWU). The unions and ESTA have been in negotiations since February. The current EA expired in June 2023.

Workers want increased staffing, access to accrued leave, improved training, higher pay based on experience, and trainees' base salary raised from the current \$48,000 per year. According to a spokesman from the CWU, ongoing staffing shortages are so bad that workers are being refused annual leave even when applying 18 months in advance.

With the Victorian Labor government refusing to meet their demands, union members voted overwhelmingly on December 12 in favour of undertaking 53 separate or combined work bans and other minor actions. These involve administrative duties, protocols, housekeeping and the wearing of union clothing.

Public school cleaners in Victoria protest job losses and pay cut

Around 700 public school contract cleaners in Victoria are facing the summer school holidays with no income and the prospect of no job or having their income cut by half next year. A group of cleaners

demonstrated in the electorate of the education minister this week over the state Labor government's continued outsourcing of their jobs to private contractors, which has led to this situation. The minister indicated that there would be no changes to government policy.

The cleaners were employed by cleaning contractor ISS Facilities Services which ended its contract on December 20. Incoming contractors Serco and Tradeflex are due to take over from January next year, leaving current staff without pay over the summer school holidays.

The United Workers Union says many of its members have been employed at 214 state schools for more than 25 years. A spokesperson for Tradeflex said the company only intended to employ 220 current ISS workers. Serco have indicated they will not maintain existing wages and conditions, saying they intend to drop wages to the industry award minimum and eliminate holiday wages.

A cleaner who has secured a job with one of the new contractors said his hours were slashed from six to three hours per day, at a lower rate of pay, effectively cutting his pay by 60 percent. His wife, who also worked for ISS, was not offered a job with the new contractors.

The United Workers Union, which has close ties with the Labor Party, has not attempted to mobilise any of its 150,000 members in support of these workers, but instead said it plans to take the state government to court over the contract, arguing that it violates both the Fair Work Act and Occupational Health and Safety law.



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