

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.

Philippines jeepney drivers hold national strike

On January 16 thousands of jeepney drivers took strike action and held protests across the Philippines to oppose the Marcos government's Public Utility Vehicle Modernisation Plan (PUVMP). The walkout follows a 12-day strike late last month.

Jeepney vehicles date back to the 1940s and were made up from surplus US army jeeps left behind after WWII. These have become the cheapest form of transport for millions of people, particularly for the poorest sections of the country's 110 million population. Drivers charge as little as 13 pesos for a ride.

PUVMP ordered the drivers to join cooperatives of at least 15 vehicles by January 31. These cooperatives will be given a government subsidy of 200,000 to 300,000 pesos per new vehicle and can access banking finance. The modern, more fuel efficient and cleaner vehicles that the government is forcing the drivers to buy cost at least 2 million pesos (\$US36,300).

The largest protest on Tuesday was in Manila, where drivers told the media that PUVMP forces them into unbearable debt. One protesting driver explained that he was not against modernisation but that the government has "made a program without consulting us." Another said he would have to earn 7,000 pesos per day to pay his contributions to the cooperative, but his daily earnings were only 600 to 700 pesos. The National Union of Peoples Lawyers estimate that PUVMP could see the revocation of franchises for nearly 64,000 jeepneys nationally.

India: Midday meal workers in Karnal protest

Midday meal workers at Karnal in the union territory of Chandigarh protested on January 11 to demand that they be made permanent government employees, paid a 26,000-rupee (\$US312) minimum monthly wage and retirement benefits. There are about 30,000 workers from this region employed in this low paid profession which provides nutrition to underprivileged school-age children.

The workers, who are members of the Midday Meal Workers Federation, chanted slogans denouncing the government and handed a memo to Sanjay Bhatla, the chief minister's representative. The protesters were told that there would be a meeting with the education minister on January 19.

Forest workers fight for higher wages in Sangrur

Forest workers in Sangrur held a protest march in Dirba on January 16, calling on the ruling Aam Admi Party government in the Punjab state to increase wages and grant permanent jobs for temporary workers and a minimum monthly wage of at least 26,000 rupees. The workers called for a 25 percent raise in their wages.

Uttar Pradesh: Lucknow Village Sanitation Appeal workers demonstrate

Sanitation appeal workers employed by the Swacch Bharath Abhiyan (a government subsidy scheme to provide toilets for village homes) are protesting for job permanency. The workers camped in Kanshiram Eco Garden in Lucknow on January 13 as part of their action. The workers are not even paid the official rate of 230 rupees per day, a bare minimum for their existence.

Sircilla power loom workers end strike action

Power loom workers from Sircilla near Hyderabad who weave polyester clothes ended a two-day strike on January 17. The strike, which began on January 15, was called off by the workers after the being given assurances that their products would be purchased by the government. The local weavers face soul-destroying poverty. Alok Kumar, a migrant worker from Uttar Pradesh, committed suicide during the strike allegedly because of overwhelming debts.

Visvesvaraya Iron and Steel Plant contract workers in Karnataka call for increased work

Visvesvaraya Iron and Steel Plant contractual workers at Bhadravathi protested outside the residence of B.Y. Raghavendra, a Shivamogga parliamentarian, on January 15. The workers and their families are demanding that the plant employ them for longer periods each month. They are currently only hired for between 10 and 12 days a month, leaving them with salaries of about 6,000 rupees.

Bangladeshi garment workers fight for reinstatement of fellow employees

Around 500 garment workers from Anlima Textile Limited began a

demonstration in Ulail area of Savar, next to Dhaka-Aricha highway, on Monday morning in protest against the termination of fellow workers.

Their walkout followed the sudden sacking of two workers from the plant's sewing section that morning. Workers have accused authorities of terminating the jobs of many workers over the past few months without even paying outstanding wages and other benefits.

Bangladeshi garment workers demand pay rises

Around 700 garment workers from the Meigo Bangladesh Bay economic zone stopped work January 13, blocking the Dhaka-Tangail highway in Konabari and Targach areas of Gazipur. They demanded immediate payment of a 12,500 taka (\$US114) minimum monthly salary as decreed in last November's agreement between the government and garment factory owners.

On the same day, over 100 workers from Moonlight Garments and Ehsan Garments in Gazipur demonstrated in the Targach area over the same demand.

Bangladeshi tea garden workers strike over seven demands

Tea pickers from Tarapur Tea Garden in Sylhet have continued strike action they began on Tuesday. They marched from the estate to submit a memo with seven demands to the deputy commissioner.

These include payment of two weeks' wage arrears, the third instalment of the allowance promised by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in August 2022, payment of benefits for retired workers, regular deposits to their provident fund, repair of their dilapidated houses, a solution to the water crisis and improved working conditions.

Regular weekly wages have not been paid by the garden authorities since December 28, creating a desperate situation for the low paid workers.

"I haven't been paid for two weeks, leading to a severe food shortage at home. Out of sheer necessity, I've joined this movement," one worker said. Another commented, "The absence of January's salary allowance forced me to deny my children school admission."

Victorian paramedics reject government enterprise offer, threaten industrial action

The Victorian Ambulance Union (VAU) on Tuesday confirmed that over 86 percent of its members had voted down Ambulance Victoria's latest enterprise bargaining agreement offer. Management's proposal, which was presented to paramedics in late December, included a below inflation three percent pay rise and a \$1,800 lump sum payment at the end of each year of the agreement. Ambulance Victoria also want to cut paramedics' sick leave and overtime entitlements as well as reduce travel allowances.

The union has called for improvements to end-of-shift management provisions so paramedics can finish on time and reduce overtime expenses. It also wants shorter night shifts that can be worked by part-time members, new health and safety provisions, and safer staffing levels in control rooms. This has been rejected by Ambulance Victoria.

The VAU has said paramedics would take industrial action if an agreement was not reached within the next two weeks.

Wire-drawn ferry crews strike in Sydney

The crews operating four of Sydney's wire-drawn ferries will begin a series of one-hour rolling stoppages on Monday for improved pay and conditions in a new enterprise agreement.

About 50 members of the CFMMEU are in dispute with Birdon Vehicular Ferries Birdon, which is a company contracted by the New South Wales Labor government to operate the wire-drawn ferries at Berowra Waters, Wisemans Ferry, Webb's Creek, Sackville and Mortlake in Sydney.

The CFMMEU says the union will escalate the strikes to cover peak hour travel if Birdon continues refusing to negotiate. After six months of negotiations the company has not made a pay offer to its workers.

According to the CFMMEU, Birdon is only paying \$29 per hour, the bare minimum allowable. The union wants equal pay with traffic controllers who are paid \$46 per hour.

Concord Hospital workers in Sydney strike over new parking rates

Over 100 Concord Hospital staff, including psychologists, scientists, theatre technicians, cleaners and security, walked off the job for an hour on Wednesday in protest against the NSW state Labor government's imposition of \$27.20 weekly parking fees for healthcare workers. Staff parking, which previously cost \$12 per week at Sydney metropolitan hospitals, became free with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Starting next month healthcare workers at 16 metropolitan hospitals will be required to pay for parking again. The Health Services Union estimates that the Labor government's reimposition of parking fees will cost health workers at least \$2,600 for parking per year.

HSU members told the media that those unable to get a permit to park at the hospital itself must use private parking facilities, which is even more expensive than the new rates to be imposed by the government. Private parking costs \$11 per day.

Naveen Singh, an ancillary worker, told the media he had been on the Concord Hospital parking permit waitlist for seven years. "It's just an extra cost, I'm having to pay nearly \$700 a fortnight for childcare, then rent and groceries and now parking—I'm left with nothing by the end of the week," he said.

The HSU is calling for Concord Hospital management to make parking free or bring fees down to pre-Covid prices. It has not indicated whether it will organise any further industrial action.

Tasmania's TasPorts pilots launch unlimited bans

Australian Maritime Officers Union (AMOU) members at TasPorts have imposed unlimited bans following a stalemate in enterprise agreement negotiations between the union and the company after six months of negotiations. TasPorts marine pilots overwhelmingly voted this month for

competitive pay rates and recognition of their skills and experience.

Apart from important medical and petroleum shipments, AMOU members stopped performing pilotage services starting at 6 am yesterday. Bans will also be applied to some night pilot duties and to communications with agents and schedulers.



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