

# 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: Tens of thousands of Tamil Nadu government workers protest in Tiruchi

Over 50,000 members of the Joint Action Council representing the Tamil Nadu Teachers Organisation and the Government Employees Organisation (Jacto-Geo) demonstrated near the District Collector's office in Tiruchi on Tuesday over a series of demands. While road traffic was interrupted, the police intervened and forced an end to the protest.

The government workers were demanding the abolition of the contributory pension scheme and restoration of the old pension scheme. They also called for the filling of the 350,000 vacancies in government departments, immediate payment of the dearness allowance and an end to outsourcing government work to private agencies.

Other demands included resumption of cash payment of surrendered leave, which was stopped during the COVID-19 pandemic, removal of pay anomalies and for anganwadi workers, midday-meal organisers, village assistants and nurses working under a special time-scale pay to be brought under regular time-scale pay.

## India: Unorganised workers in Karnataka protest

Thousands of unorganised sector workers demonstrated across Karnataka state on Thursday over low pay and irregular working hours. The largest protest was called by the All India Trade Union Congress at Freedom Park in Bengaluru.

The workers' major demand was for the state government to increase minimum wages in the upcoming budget as per guidelines set by the Supreme Court.

Protesters included anganwadi (childcare) and Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA) employees, along with workers from factories, plantations, construction, transport, banking and insurance, as well as mining, beedi (cigarette rollers) and gig workers.

Anganwadi workers called for a monthly salary hike to 15,000 rupees (\$US181) and higher stipends for midday meals, ASHA workers to be lifted to 10,000 rupees and factory workers' minimum wage increased to 15,000 rupees. Gig and mining workers demanded that their working hours be regulated.

## Lok Nayak Hospital contract workers strike over unpaid wages in Delhi

Lok Nayak Hospital contract workers in Delhi walked off the job on Monday and demonstrated outside the medical director's office to protest a ten-month delay in wage payments. The strike affected three out of the nine operating theatres at Delhi's largest government hospital. Forty seven theatre and lab technicians joined the walkout.

These workers assist doctors in operating theatres and operate ventilators in intensive care units. They also monitor patients administered with anaesthesia before surgery. Strikers returned to work the next day after the chief medical officer agreed to resolve the issue within 15 days.

## Sacked Tamil Nadu mosquito eradication workers demand reinstatement

Around 400 contract Domestic Breeder Checking workers from the Madurai Municipal Corporation demonstrated outside the corporation's office on Monday to protest their termination. The workers conduct door-to-door surveys to identify breeding sources of mosquitos and other parasites.

The corporation suddenly terminated 530 breeder checkers when their two-year contracts expired, claiming that there was not enough work for them. The protest ended following a verbal promise from the health office that their issues would be examined by the corporation commissioner.

## Punjab health workers strike for higher pay

Accredited Social Health Activists and members of the Facilitators Workers Union-Punjab demonstrated at the Civil Surgeon's office in Tarn Taran on January 24 over the state government's refusal to increase their pay. Workers presented a memorandum of demands to the Civil Surgeon. These included their monthly pay to be increased to 26,000 rupees (\$US313) as recommended by the Sixth Pay Commission and that they made permanent employees.

## Andhra Pradesh contract forest workers strike for permanent jobs

Contract forest workers employed by the Tirumala Tirupati

Devasthanam (TTD) held a hunger strike protest on January 27 to demand permanent jobs. The TTD is an independent trust which manages the Tirumala Venkateswara Temple and religious tourist centre. The workers, many who have been employed by TTD for over ten years, have held many isolated strikes since 2019 over this issue.

### **Sri Lankan public sector executive officers demand allowance increase**

Hundreds of public sector executive officers held a sick-leave strike on Monday to protest the Wickremasinghe government failure to address their demands. The protest was called by the Joint Committee of Government Executive Officers (JCGEO).

The workers, who demanded the government resolve long-standing salary anomalies, chanted slogans such as “pay pensions and all allowances for all public sector executive officers” and “provide living wage for all.”

### **Australia: Antarctic research vessel officers and engineers campaign for higher wages**

On January 24, electro-technical officers and marine engineers employed by international contractor Serco on the Nuyina, an Australian Antarctic research ship and icebreaker, began a series of work bans and stoppages for an improved pay offer in a new enterprise agreement. The vessel is docked in its home port of Hobart.

The 29 workers are members of the Australian Maritime Officers Union (AMOU) and Australian Institute of Marine and Power Engineers (AIMPE).

Serco insists that there be no change in conditions or pay rise in the new agreement. The unions argue that the current agreement, which began in 2020 and expired on January 6, 2024, has “fallen behind” workers on comparable vessels.

An AIMPE spokesperson alleged that Serco is not fully manning the sophisticated research vessel, which operates in the harshest of Antarctic conditions. He also said that pay and conditions are worse than for workers on vessels in Bass Strait and well below the rates of pay and conditions that apply to the Investigator research vessel, which is operated by the CSIRO.

After rejecting Serco’s proposed agreement, workers voted overwhelmingly on January 19 to take future industrial action. On January 30, Serco sought an urgent hearing with the Fair Work Commission in an attempt to stop further industrial action.

### **Queensland public school teachers to strike over staff shortages**

About 180 Queensland Teachers’ Union (QTU) members in three Queensland regional secondary schools will hold stop work meetings next week to discuss further industrial action to overcome ongoing teacher shortages. Teachers at North Rockhampton, Sarina and Biloela State High Schools will stop work for one hour at 2 p.m.

The QTU says that ongoing teacher vacancies have led to oversized classes, teachers forced to take a range of subjects outside their areas of

expertise, new teachers receiving less support from experienced staff and some classes being temporarily covered by supervision only.

The three schools started the 2024 school year with up to 11 teaching vacancies, across a range of subject areas. QTU has not indicated if further action could be taken.

### **Western Australia public school teachers take action over stalled pay negotiations**

About 18,000 public school teachers in Western Australia began low-level industrial action on January 30 demanding the state Labor government “speed up” negotiations on a new enterprise agreement. State School Teachers’ Union (SSTU) members will not participate in performance reviews or attend staff meetings outside school hours.

Their last agreement expired on December 5. The union is seeking a 12 percent wage increase over the next two years—7 percent this year and 5 percent next year. The union’s demand goes nowhere near making up for years of below-inflation pay increases. The teachers’ last pay rise in December 2022 was only 2.75 percent when inflation was rapidly approaching 7 percent.

In September 2023, the Australian Bureau of Statistics reported Australia’s annual Employee Cost of Living increase to be 9 percent, meaning the SSTU wage rise demand is just another pay cut.

### **Transdev bus drivers in southeast Queensland strike for pay increase**

Sixty bus drivers at transport operator Transdev depots in Redlands and Capalaba, southeast Queensland, stopped work from 7 a.m. to 5 p.m. on Monday in opposition to Transdev’s proposed enterprise agreement. The Transport Workers Union has been trying to negotiate a deal with the company for over six months.

Workers want improved conditions, particularly around safety, and a wage rise to keep up with the cost of living. They are demanding \$35 an hour. The union claimed that Transdev have agreed to only two items from the workers’ claims.

### **Victorian Country Fire Authority vehicle maintenance workers strike for better pay**

The Australian Services Union (ASU), covering Victorian Fire Authority (VFA) vehicle maintenance workers, notified VFA that its members will stop work for four hours each day for a week commencing February 5. Workers are demanding a better pay offer in CFA’s proposed enterprise agreement and retention of current conditions.

ASU has been in enterprise negotiations with CFA for over 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 ended this in December while waiting for CFA to offer a revised agreement. The ASU claimed that the revised offer was worse than the previous offer, which included 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 latest offer increased the bonus to \$5,000 but CFA still insisted on removing some long-standing conditions such as substitute days for doing standby duty on a public holiday. ASU alleged that VFA has "steadfastly" refused to improve the pay offer, which if accepted would be a real pay cut.

### **Sydney's wire-drawn ferry workers extend strike action**

Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) members employed on wire-drawn ferries on the outskirts of Sydney have extended strike action begun last week. The MUA, a division of the Construction Forestry Mining Maritime and Energy Union, are in dispute with ferry contractor Birdon and the New South Wales government over wages and conditions in a new enterprise agreement.

Five ferry river crossings are affected, with stoppages at different times at each crossing. Most are affected with reduced services from Friday and through the weekend.

Workers want improved conditions and equal pay for equal work, saying that they are among the lowest-paid ferry workers in Australia. Birdon have decreed they will not offer a single cent above the legal minimum. Current hourly rates, in accordance with the NSW Ports, Harbours and Enclosed Water Vessels Award, are just \$29.

The workers' last rise of 5.7 percent was in July 2023. The union is demanding \$46 per hour to bring ferry crews into line with NSW traffic controllers.

### **Victorian mobile-speed camera workers strike again for improved pay and conditions**

Following a two-day strike on December 31 and a limited walkout on January 26, roadside mobile speed camera workers employed by facilities services contractor Serco in Tullamarine, Melbourne, walked off the job for 24 hours on January 31 to demand a higher pay rise offer and improved safety in their new enterprise agreement.

Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) and Australian Services Union members rallied outside Serco's Tullamarine depot holding placards saying "We deserve respect, better pay, a safer workplace" and "Sack Serco," among others. A major concern for workers is safety while on the job.

The December 31 strike was sparked after a roadside-speed camera operator was attacked by a group of people three days before Christmas. According to the CPSU, Serco said they were offering no concessions to any of the unions' claims for improving safety.

The CPSU says some of its members are paid as little as \$26 an hour, a little above the national adult minimum wage of \$23.23 per hour. Workers rejected Serco's pay increase offer of \$1.70 per hour, while being subjected to harassment and assault at work. Their last wage rise was in November 2022 of only 2 percent, well below the rise in the consumer price index at the time of 4.1 percent. In an attempt to head off industrial action, Serco started paying the workers a 4.5 percent "good faith" rise without an agreement being reached.

As a part of ongoing industrial action, union members have been warning drivers of speed camera locations, placing signs on the side of the road that read: "Camera car ahead, slow down for safety."

### **V/Line rail workers in Victoria to walk out again for better pay offer**

Following two four-hour strikes in December and January as part of a pay dispute, the Rail Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) has notified the government that members in the V/Line regional rail network will hold a series of stoppages during February. Four-hour strikes will be held on February 12, 16, 19 and 23.

The action will have the effect of shutting the rail network on those days while 1,260 conductors, train controllers, station and customer service staff, and authorised officers walk out. Train drivers, who are covered by the RTBU, will not be called to strike.

The RTBU has been negotiating with V/Line over wages and conditions for a new enterprise agreement since June. Workers want increased staffing levels to meet staff shortfalls and higher consumer demands, improved job security as new technologies are introduced and higher wages to meet cost of living pressures. The RTBU's wage rise demand is just 17 percent, spread over four years, or 4.25 percent per annum.

### **Union cancels New Zealand port workers' strike**

A three-day strike by South Port workers in New Zealand was called off earlier this week. Negotiations between the port, situated at Bluff on the South Island, and the union reached an agreement on Tuesday, hours before the workers were to strike on Wednesday.

Maritime Union NZ national secretary Craig Harrison confirmed that all strike actions had been pulled, even before the workers had seen the details. "Hopefully, the union will have a document from the company to take with them next week to ratify," he said.

The company had earlier offered a 6 percent general wage increase, plus other skillset rate adjustments, which made the offer equivalent to an 8.2 percent wage increase, with backpay to September 2023, on top of a 7 percent general wage increase in 2023. Workers rejected this deal because it was not in line with rises in the Consumer Price Index.

Asked if their demands had been met, Harrison said, "There's compromise on both sides and we're happy with where we're landing with South Port." A company spokesman praised the union's collaboration, saying the settlement is a "good outcome for all parties concerned. We will continue to work collaboratively to ensure we operate safely and efficiently to deliver a quality service."



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