

# 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.*

## South Korea: Samsung workers call for wage rise and improved conditions

On Tuesday, the Samsung Group Labour Union Solidarity (SGLUS), representing 11 Samsung unions, called for an average 5.4 percent wage increase this year. The increase includes 3.6 percent for 2023 inflation and a 1.8 percent increase in labour productivity.

Other demands were for Samsung to improve the wage peak system, extend the retirement age, ensure work-life balance, including five days of refreshment leave, introduce a fairer evaluation system and establish a joint labour-management task force.

SGLUS represents unions from Samsung Group affiliates, including Samsung Display Co., Samsung Life Insurance Co. and Samsung Fire & Marine Insurance Co. Indicating that the unions were willing to do a compromise deal, SGLUS proposed a face-to-face meeting with Samsung Electronics chairman Lee Lae-yong “to improve labour-management relations.”

## India: Uttar Pradesh rural daily wage workers demand pay increase

Rural daily wage workers employed under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) have been protesting in Lucknow, the Uttar Pradesh state capital, since February 3. The workers, who are guaranteed only 100 days' work a year on a daily wage between 100 (\$US1.21) and 200 rupees, want this increased to 400 rupees per day.

Other demands are for extra work and permanent jobs and that work be extended during drought and famine. They are calling for an end to caste discrimination which is prevalent in India's rural regions.

Meanwhile in Punjab state, MGNREGA workers from various villages in Tarn Taran district demonstrated at the Collector's office on February 2. Their demands were for 200 days of guaranteed work, payment on the spot and provision for female workers to care for children at the worksite.

## Punjab Anganwadi workers and helpers protest in Ludhiana

Anganwadi (childcare) workers and helpers demonstrated outside the

home of member of parliament Ravnit Singh Bittu in Ludhiana on February 6 where they burnt an effigy of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. They were demanding on-time payment of wages and an end to the closure of Anganwadi centres by the central government.

One worker told the media that the government was ignoring their hardships and other issues that could lead to complete destruction of public health measures in rural areas.

## Bangladeshi transport workers in Sylhet demand release of union leaders

Goods transport workers protested in Sylhet on Tuesday evening to demand the release of four trade union leaders—two from Sylhet District and two from Golapganj sub-district—who were arrested by the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB). The leaders were arrested by RAB officers during a raid on their offices in Dakshin Surma and Golapganj. No reasons were given for the raids by the notoriously violent RAB force.

Members of the Sylhet District Truck, Pickup, Covered-van Workers Union blocked entryways to Sylhet city, including the Dhaka-Sylhet and the Sylhet-Tamabil highways, causing heavy traffic congestion for several hours. Workers ended their protest after the union leaders were released.

## Sri Lankan public sector workers hold joint protests against government attacks

Thousands of public sector workers across Sri Lanka held protests on Wednesday to oppose the witch hunting and interdiction of Ceylon Electricity Board workers by the Wickremasinghe government. Workers from Sri Lanka Telecom, the Ceylon Government Railway, Government Development Officers and several other government bodies demonstrated outside their respective institutions.

Workers chanted slogans and displayed placards stating, “immediately re-instate interdicted workers,” “stop selling state institutions,” “stop repression of trade unions” and “lower the electricity bills to the public immediately.”

Workers from several cities, including Galle, Matara, Baddegama, Ambalangoda, Ambalantota in Southern Province, Horana, Colombo, Gampaha in Western Province, and Anuradhapura in North Central Province, joined the main demonstration outside the Ceylon Electricity Board's head office.

## **Sri Lankan health sector workers continue protests for living allowances**

As part of a series of health workers' struggles, the Public Service United Nurses Association and Free Health Care Association organised a protest to demand economic justice and decent living conditions. Hundreds of workers demonstrated in front of their respective hospitals on Tuesday denouncing the Wickremasinghe government, saying it is impossible to live in the current inflationary conditions.

Hospital workers from Kurunegala in Wayamba Province and Anuradhapura in North Central Province, among others, joined the protests.

## **Qantas pilots in Western Australia strike for equal pay and conditions**

Around 250 pilots from the fully owned Qantas subsidiary Network Aviation in Western Australia stopped work for 24 hours on Thursday. It was the second walkout in six months over the pay dispute. The Australian Federation of Air Pilots (AFAP) has been attempting to secure a new enterprise agreement with Qantas for over 18 months. Pilots have voted down Qantas's proposed enterprise offer three times.

The pilots' current agreement expired in 2020 and they have not had a pay rise since 2019. The AFAP says its members are the lowest paid in the Qantas Group even though they fly the same aircraft on similar routes. They want salaries and conditions improved to match those of other Qantas pilots and in line with the Air Pilots Award. The pilots turned down the last offer from Qantas for a 25 percent pay increase, as well as yearly 3 percent increases in a three-year agreement.

The pilots are also calling for the sign-on from reserve time extended 30 minutes to 2 hours, start time after a day off moved from 4 a.m. to 6:00 a.m., on duty travel in a business class seat, equal duty hours allowance, ten days rostered off in place of 8, overtime increased using the same formula, and better rostering.

Network Aviation covers multiple routes across regional Western Australia, including fly-in-fly-out (FIFO) flights to multiple mines. Qantas has applied to the Fair Work Commission to arbitrate the eighteen-month dispute.

## **Opal paper mill workers in Victoria locked out**

Paper manufacturer Opal Australia locked out 65 members of the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) from its Maryvale mill in Victoria's Gippsland region on Tuesday in response to ongoing industrial action for a new enterprise agreement.

AMWU members were immediately joined by Electrical Trades Union (ETU) and United Workers Union (UWU) members who stopped work and formed a picket outside the mill. ETU and UWU members said they will remain on strike until Opal's indefinite lockout of AMWU members is lifted.

The ETU claimed that Opal has engaged scab workers and is driving them through the picket in buses with windows blacked out.

The four unions at the mill—AMWU, ETU, UWU and the Construction Forestry Maritime and Energy Union (CFMEU)—have been taking industrial action during concurrent negotiations with Opal for separate

new enterprise agreements. The CFMEU has not called its members out in solidarity with the other unions.

Workers are opposed to Opal's demand that they accept a rollover of previous wage increases, maintain current rosters and remove union member quota numbers in the previous agreements. The AMWU said its main concerns centre on job security, contract labour, overtime and income protection. It said the current agreement ensures the employment of members over contractors.

According to a media report, all four unions have decreased their demand for 6 percent annual pay increases to a sub-inflation rate of just 4 percent, but Opal has not changed its demands.

The lockout and solidarity strikes are occurring just before Opal planned maintenance shutdown of the mill on February 17 and its conversion from hardwood to softwood processing.

## **Power transmission workers in New South Wales strike for pay rise**

Over 1,000 New South Wales power transmission network workers from Transgrid and Endeavour Energy walked off the job for 24 hours in separate industrial action on Thursday in opposition to proposed enterprise agreements from the companies. The Electrical Trades Union (ETU) says it wants a yearly 8 percent pay rise over three years to compensate for previous sub-inflation wage increases. It claimed that wages at Endeavour have only increased by 10.5 percent since 2019 and by 8 percent at Transgrid even though inflation was 18 percent over the same period.

Workers rejected Endeavour's pay rise offer of an upfront \$1,000 payment followed by pay increases of 5.25 percent from July 1 this year, 3.25 percent for 2025 and 2.75 percent for 2026. Transgrid's offer of a 13 percent increase over three years was also rejected.

Endeavour Energy (privatised in 2011) operates the electrical distribution network for Greater Western Sydney while Transgrid (privatised in 2015) has assets that include transmission lines, high-voltage underground cables, substations, switching stations and digital infrastructure transferring electricity to more than three million households and businesses across NSW and the Australian Capital Territory.

## **Kinetic bus drivers in South East Queensland to strike against their union's inferior pay deal**

A group of about 30 workers from Surfside Buslines, South East Queensland, have served notice on their employer Kinetic saying they will stop work for 6 hours on February 12. The workers, who are represented by an Independent Bargaining Unit (IBU), are opposed to the recent tentative pay deal done between the Transport Workers Union (TWU) and the state Labor government.

About 400 TWU members, including drivers and cleaner/refuellers employed on three separate agreements by two Kinetic subsidiaries—Surfside and Sunbus, and Clarks Logan City Bus Service—have been taking industrial action since mid-2023 demanding pay rises to increase drivers' pay to \$35 an hour and cleaner/refuellers above \$23 an hour.

The TWU's Facebook page claimed on January 23 that it had secured a \$155 million commitment from the state government that will push up drivers' wages to \$35 an hour by 2025.

The IBU is seeking the return of conditions lost in previous agreements

accepted by the TWU. These include casual loading increased to 25 percent from 23 percent, permanent drivers paid 7.6 hours pay if they are rostered off on public holidays and Surfside drivers in New South Wales be given the Gold Coast show day as a public holiday. These entitlements were removed by Kinetic in 2018.

### Tasmania's TasPorts marine pilots resume industrial action

Australian Maritime Officers Union (AMOU) members at TasPorts resumed protected industrial action on Wednesday in their fight for an improved enterprise agreement (EA) offer. The action includes ongoing work bans and stoppages on Saturdays, Sundays and public holidays. Bans prohibit conducting any work outside usual rostered hours, communication with agents and schedulers and pilotage services at night.

The stoppages are expected to suspend TasPorts pilot services in and out of the state's major ports, but the union has exempted "essential" ship movements such as medical and petroleum deliveries.

AMOU pilots originally planned to commence industrial action in early January after six months of failed enterprise agreement negotiations for a wage rise and improved conditions. The union alleged that TasPorts pilots are the lowest paid in Australia and that their compensation should reflect the vital nature of their work and be in parity with pilots in other Australian states.

The company's original pay rise offer was 12 percent over three years which it then increased to 14.25 percent but with productivity improvements. The pilots rejected the offer.

Industrial action begun on January 19 was suspended by the union ten days later, declaring that negotiations had resumed in "good faith." The suspension of industrial action, however, came to nothing and the AMOU has applied to the Fair Work Commission to facilitate negotiations.

TasPorts management has threatened to quickly train more pilots as scabs and strike breakers, which could impact safety. Marine pilots are usually ship masters or chief officers with more than ten years' sea experience and trained in local piloting programs. TasPorts claims it can skip the usual training to get new pilots licensed and they could start docking ships.

### New Zealand medical laboratory workers renew strike action

Over 1,000 medical laboratory workers employed by private blood testing provider Awanui Labs held a one-day strike on February 5 as part of a long-running pay dispute. It was their sixth strike in a struggle for pay parity with their colleagues who are employed by Te Whatu Ora in the public sector,

In December, the APEX union lifted strike notices and held a ratification ballot for a short-term collective agreement offered by Awanui after two days of facilitated bargaining. The union told members in a newsletter that the deal was "nowhere near achieving parity" with Te Whatu Ora rates but claimed it could be the "swiftest route to parity and offers members some financial relief in the meanwhile."

The deal included pay increases from July 2023 of 5.5 percent for scientists, and \$4,750 for technician rates, plus a lump sum of \$750.00. None was sufficient to lift the pay rates of the Awanui workforce, many of whom earn just \$28 per hour, marginally above the legal minimum of \$22.70, to an adequate level.

The company is insisting that it will only look at "cost-of-living

pressures, not parity." Workers rejected the offer and resumed strike action despite the union warning that although continued strike action would put pressure on the company, there was "very little prospect in the short-term of solving the problem."

APEX decreed there would be no picketing or protests during Monday's strike and was hoping for further involvement of the Employment Relations Authority to resolve the dispute.



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