

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: Uttarakhand government employment agency workers strike

Thousands of government employment agency workers from the Uttarakhand Purva Sainik Kalyan Nigam Limited (UPNL) began an indefinite protest in the state capital Dehradun on Monday to demand permanent jobs. Protesters from various government departments, including health, agriculture, education and sanitation, marched from the Parade Ground to the state secretariat.

The High Court had directed the government to make UPNL workers permanent but the government filed a petition in the Supreme Court in 2018 against the orders.

Bihar public school contract teachers protest mandatory competency examination

Tens of thousands of public-school contract teachers protested in Patna, the Bihar state capital, on February 13 to oppose the government's recent decision ordering them to pass a competency examination to obtain state government employee status.

Over 350,000 teachers ignored government threats of legal action and job loss for absenteeism and assembled at the Gardanibagh protest site in Patna. They raised slogans and displayed posters and banners. Heavy security blocked the teachers' attempt to surround the Bihar Assembly during the ongoing budget session.

Tamil Nadu garment workers protest 10-year delay in minimum wage rise

About 30 members of the Garment and Fashion Workers Union protested outside the labour commissioner's office in Chennai on Monday against the prolonged delay in notification of the new minimum wage. Tamil Nadu garment workers have not had a pay rise for ten years.

Under the Minimum Wages Act, state governments in India must increase the minimum wage every five years. This has not happened for garment workers in Tamil Nadu who have not had an increase since 2014 because manufacturers took the matter to court and through continuous appeals have blocked the pay rise.

The workers currently earn between 9,875 rupees (\$US119) and 10,514 rupees per month, depending on category. The minimum wage set in 2014 would have lifted wages considerably to between 15,211 rupees (\$US183) and 16,379 rupees.

In November, the Supreme Court directed the state to address the matter immediately. Responding to protesters' demands, the deputy commissioner for labour assured workers that the wage would be determined in accordance with the 2014 determination before the next wage review.

Tamil Nadu state power utility workers protest privatisation

Tamil Nadu Generation and Distribution Corporation workers demonstrated in Madurai on February 13 against government plans to divide the State Electricity Corporation into three firms—the Green, Thermal and Distribution corporations. Workers feared this would privatise the entire sector and lead to increased tariffs and cuts in their benefits.

The Centre for Indian Trade Unions and the Madurai Employee Federation alleged that the restructure was promoted by the Tamil Nadu Electricity Consumers Association which represents big industrial consumers who want privatisation.

Punjab government outsourced power workers protest delay in salaries

Electrical Workmen Union members protested outside the Section 9 office of the superintendent engineer in Chandigarh on Wednesday to demand payment of pending salaries for outsourced employees. They have not been paid for three months.

Union representatives called off the protest after the administration assured them that all salaries would be released within a week. The union warned that if these issues were not resolved they would surround the administrative secretariat on February 22.

Maharashtra rural social health workers on strike

Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHA) workers from across Maharashtra state began an indefinite strike on February 9 to demand a wage increase and bonus. Defying the heat, they gathered in the Mumbai

sports ground. Five protesting workers outside of the collector's office were impacted by the heat and hospitalised.

ASHA workers are demanding wages of 7,000 rupees (\$US84) and 2,000 rupees as the Diwali (Hindu festival) bonus, which were agreed to by the state government during a workers' protest in November. Workers said they would continue their strike until the government honours its agreements.

Assam childcare workers and helpers protest for wage rise

Anganwadi (childcare) workers, mini-anganwadi workers (childcare workers in centres in small hamlets) and their helpers protested outside the Women and Children directorate at Guwahati in northern Assam on February 14 to demand a wage rise. Workers want a monthly wage of 12,000 rupees (\$US144) for anganwadi workers, 10,000 for mini-anganwadi workers and 7,000 for helpers. The protest was called by the Assam State Anganwadi workers and Helpers Association.

Karnataka National Health Mission contract workers strike for permanent jobs

About 7,000 Karnataka National Health Mission contract workers protested at Freedom Park in Bangalore on February 15. Demands were permanent jobs for employees who have worked for six years, a 15 percent pay rise, releasing outstanding deductions and a 10 percent royalty bonus. A union spokesperson said workers were on indefinite strike. A heightened police force was sent to the protest.

Bangladeshi garment workers demand outstanding wages

Hundreds of garment workers from two closed factories in Fatuallah district of Narayanganj demonstrated on Sunday against the closures and demanded outstanding wages for December and January.

Workers from the Abanti Colour Tex factory, with 7,000 employees, demonstrated on the factory premises for two hours in the morning, then moved to the Dhaka-Munshiganj regional road, causing traffic congestion. One worker told media, "In the morning, we came to work and found the factory closed. Police in front of the factory did not allow us to enter."

Workers called off the protest after an industrial police representative gave a verbal assurance that the factory would be opened, and salaries paid on Monday.

On the same day, more than a hundred workers from a closed plant of the Rupashi Group of Industries demonstrated outside the Narayanganj Press Club. The United Federation of Garments Workers said 700 workers have not been paid since November.

Bangladeshi food and beverage factory workers demand higher wages

Thousands of factory workers from Reedisha Food and Beverage in Gazipur's Sreepur demonstrated on February 7 to demand a salary hike.

The owner responded by closing the plant the next day. One worker told the media that when he arrived at the factory the next day there was a closure note on the gate.

Sri Lankan government workers demonstrate in Colombo

Development officers and security and disaster management workers demonstrated outside the Ministry of National Security and Disaster Management in Colombo on Tuesday to demand the withdrawal of restructure plans to lay off workers and "cripple" disaster management services.

Members of the Association of State Surveyors demonstrated outside the Department of the Surveyor General in Colombo on the same day protesting outsourcing of their work to the private sector and demanding increased allowances.

Non-education university workers from different universities marched to the ministry of higher education on Tuesday to demand a wage increase and accusing the government of breaching promises.

Qantas pilots in Western Australia hold six-day strike over low pay

The Australian Federation of Air Pilots (AFAP), representing around 250 pilots from the fully owned Qantas subsidiaries Network Aviation and QantasLink in Western Australia, told Qantas on Tuesday that its members would strike for six days, commencing the following day. It is the second strike in the past seven days, after a 24-hour stoppage last week saw 35 flights cancelled.

The 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 three percent increases in a three-year agreement.

The pilots want 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 eight, 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. One pilot told the media that Qantas have pushed everything to the limit. "There is a toxic workplace culture of blame and bullying," he said. Others raised safety issues, such as tired pilots who are angry and frustrated from early mornings and late nights.

Some commentators in the industry believe Qantas' plans for its WA subsidiaries are to make them a second low-cost carrier that will slowly take over many of the routes now flown by its far more costly 737 fleet.

BHP iron ore train drivers in Western Australia strike for improved

conditions

BHP iron ore train drivers in the Pilbara, Western Australia, stopped work for 24 hours on Friday to demand an improved enterprise agreement offer. The agreement covers over 400 Mining and Energy Union (MEU) members, including drivers, shunters and trainees. MEU members voted last week to approve taking industrial action, including stoppages and slowdowns. The strike will stop BHP hauling iron ore from its mines to Port Hedland for export.

Negotiations for a new agreement have been ongoing for two years. Workers rejected a revised offer from management in December of increased pay and allowances with a \$40,000 sign-on bonus. The union claimed that substantive concerns relating to rosters and accommodation standards had not been addressed and that members saw the bonus as a bribe. The MEU alleged that the offer still left many important conditions in company policy or at the mercy of management.

V/Line rail workers in Victoria strike again

V/Line operations staff, including conductors, train controllers, station and customer service staff and authorised officers, stopped work for four hours between 3 a.m. and 7 a.m. on Monday and Friday, temporarily shutting down Victoria's regional rail network. The action followed strikes in December and January. The Rail Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) has given notice that similar four-hour stoppages are planned for February 19 and 23.

The RTBU has been negotiating with V/Line over wages and conditions for a new 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.

Close to 1,000 RTBU V/Line members in November voted in favor of taking industrial action. Train drivers are not participating in the current action although they are members of the RTBU.

Hobart Clinic mental health nurses in Tasmania protest for higher pay

A dozen nurses who are members of the Health and Community Services Union (HACSU) at the Hobart Clinic, a mental health hospital in Rokeby, a suburb of Hobart, demonstrated outside the clinic on Tuesday to demand a pay rise higher than the 3.5 percent currently offered by management.

The union alleged that nurses at the clinic are paid less and receive fewer entitlements than nurses doing the same work in the public system in other states. Nurses are also demanding double pay for Sunday work. There are about 50 nurses employed at the clinic, 19 of whom are members of the HACSU.

On January 5, the Fair Work Commission suspended industrial action by the nurses, and on January 18 extended the suspension for 30 days. The Commission claimed the action posed a risk to patient safety. The action involved handing out leaflets explaining their dispute and wearing a union badge while on duty.

Queensland construction workers protest heat exposure

Thousands of construction workers and supporters demonstrated outside Queensland's parliament in Brisbane on Thursday over claims of dozens of heat stress incidents at Queensland worksites. The protest was in response to the death of a worker Daniel Sa'u, a 29-year-old labour hire worker, who allegedly died of heat stress working at the Cross River Rail Salisbury site in late December.

The Construction Forestry Maritime and Energy Union (CFMEU) told protesters that 25 other workers had been hospitalised due to heat stress since Christmas. The union is calling for the Queensland government to introduce an effective heat stress code of practice for outdoor and high-risk work.



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