

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: Apple phone manufacturing workers strike in Tamil Nadu for higher pay and union recognition

Around 750 permanent workers from the Flex manufacturing plant in Chennai, which produces Apple phones, held a one-day strike on February 16. Their demands include higher wages, recognition of their union and medical leave, among many others. The plant employs around 4,000 workers, including contract workers who were not part of the strike due to union discrimination.

As per government laws, contract workers are not allowed to do “core jobs” and the unions don’t consider them to be part of the permanent workforce, making them tier-2 workers. These workers face difficulty with rising rents, education fees, food and health expenses and are fighting hard to make ends meet. The company is ignoring the workers’ demands. Striking workers want to affiliate with the Centre for Indian Trade Unions.

Maharashtra rural social health workers maintain indefinite strike

Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHA) workers from across Maharashtra state are maintaining their strike begun on January 12 with demands that include permanent jobs and similar wages and bonuses as government workers. They want a 7,000-rupee (\$US84) monthly wage and 2,000-rupee Diwali (Hindu festival) bonus, which were agreed to by the state government during a workers’ protest in November.

Defying the heat, ASHA workers gathered in the Mumbai sports ground. Last week, five protesting workers outside of the collector’s office were impacted by the heat and hospitalised. Workers said they would continue their strike until the government honours its agreements.

Uttarakhand childcare workers strike for permanent jobs

About 35,000 anganwadi (childcare) workers and helpers across Uttarakhand state stopped work on February 19 to demand permanent jobs. Workers picketed childcare centres, forcing some to close.

A spokesperson for the anganwadi workers, helpers and mini anganwadi employees in Dehradun said workers set a deadline of February 20 for their demands to be met. They threatened that the strike would continue

until they get positive news from the state government’s Ministry of Women Empowerment and Children Development.

Tamil Nadu government nurses demand acceleration of promotions

Tamil Nadu Government All Nurses Association members demonstrated in Madurai on Monday to demand an acceleration of the review process for nurses’ promotions. The review process has not been held since 2022, meaning many eligible nurses retired as staff nurses without receiving promotions to the nursing superintendent grade 2 position. The association said about 600 nurses were affected.

Nurses also protested that contract workers who began work three years ago with minimum wages had not been made permanent.

Tamil Nadu multipurpose hospital workers demand permanent jobs

Multipurpose hospital workers in Chennai demonstrated on Monday for permanent jobs. Nearly 400 workers, including 200 women, participated. These workers have been serving in the state government hospitals since 2013 and called on the government to honour its election promise to give them permanent status.

Himachal Pradesh teachers in Shimla demand to be made permanent

Teachers appointed by the School Management Committees (SMC) to work in the rural areas of the Himalayan Indian state of Himachal Pradesh protested this week in Shimla, the state capital, to demand permanent jobs.

These SMC teachers have been providing services in remote rural areas of the state for the past 12 years. They complained that despite meeting the minimum qualifications for permanent jobs, the government had not taken any steps to make them permanent.

Kerala rural bank employees protest over several demands

Workers from the Kerala Grama Bank (KGB) and Regional Rural Bank demonstrated outside the Reserve Bank of India in Thiruvananthapuram on February 15. The protest included members of the KGB Employees

Union, KGB Officers Union and the KGB Retirees Forum, affiliated to the All India Regional Rural Bank Employees Association (AIRRBEA).

Workers want all vacant positions filled, permanent jobs for daily wage workers and pensions for retired workers on par with current permanent workers.

The protest was part of a national-level agitation called by the AIRREA, which was to be followed by a one-day national strike yesterday and a two-day strike on March 23 and 24. Regional rural bank workers are calling for the formation of a new apex body to bring all the rural banks across the country under one roof and form the National Rural Bank of India.

Kerala rural health workers protest delays in central government funding

National Health Mission workers and Accredited Social Health Activist workers in Kerala have been protesting delays in the release of central government funds for the 2023–24 financial year. Protesters marched to central government offices across Kerala this week demanding immediate transfer of funds to the state.

Workers said the lack of funds has severely impacted on distribution of medicines, diagnostic charges, consumables, funds for Cath Lab, and insurance schemes for beneficiaries. The central government was accused of withholding 8.2 billion rupees (\$US99 million), affecting the functioning of the centrally sponsored scheme.

Punjab social health workers protest in Patiala

Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHA) workers protested outside the Civil Hospital in Fatehpur Sahib against poverty wages on Monday. The protest was called by the ASHA workers and Facilitators Union.

The employees do online and offline work but are paid very meagre wages. They earn a 21,000-rupee (\$US253) monthly wage. They have threatened to continue their struggle until February 29.

Bangladesh: Mahmud Jeans factory workers strike for outstanding pay

Around 4,500 workers from the Mahmud Jeans garments factory in Gazipur's Kaliakoir sub-district stopped work for five hours starting at 9 a.m. on February 17 to demand outstanding pay. Workers complained that only 40 percent of their basic salary for the month of January was paid. Last year's annual earned leave has also not been paid. The workers agreed to end their protest following a promise that the arrears would be paid by Thursday.

Sri Lankan government sector educators protest for wage adjustments

The Government Teachers' Principals Trade Union Alliance protested at Kandy in Central Province on Tuesday to demand payment of salary

anomalies, outstanding for 24 years.

Hundreds of educators marched towards the city centre, which was blocked by police. They demonstrated in Dalada Street chanting slogans calling for the removal of salary anomalies, immediate implementation of teacher principal grades promotions and cuts to education equipment prices.

The union alleged that the educators were given just one third of the actual anomalies in 2022 and are yet to receive the rest.

A union spokesperson said that the protest was part of a series of actions planned in all parts of the country, beginning in Kandy. Educators have threatened strike action if demands are not granted.

Sydney's wire-drawn ferry workers strike again for pay rise

Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) members employed on wire-drawn ferries in the outskirts of Sydney walked off for 24 hours on Monday in their pay dispute with ferry operator contractor Birdon and the New South Wales government. Traffic at five ferry crossings was affected with workers only operating ferries in the case of medical emergencies.

Workers want improved conditions and equal pay for equal work, saying that they are among the lowest-paid ferry workers in Australia. Birdon is refusing to meet with the workers and says it will not offer anything 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.

Workers want their new enterprise agreement to include work-life-balance rosters and basic entitlements, such as long service leave and domestic violence leave, improved training and safety, and adequate supply of clothing. The MUA accused Birdon of systematically understaffing the ferries in breach of their contract with Transport for NSW, putting the safety of the public at risk.

DP World electricians locked out at Port Brisbane during wage negotiations

Fifteen members of the Electrical Trades Union at DP World's Port Brisbane terminal are locked out, after taking protected industrial action that began in late December and included a walkout on January 11 and February 15. Workers are demanding an improved pay offer in the company's proposed enterprise agreement. Negotiations for a new agreement began in October.

DP World offered annual pay increases of 6, 4, 4 and 4.5 percent. The ETU claimed that DP World wants to take out existing conditions like closed port days and public holiday payments which members won't agree to.

Qantas pilots' union suspends four-day strike following requests from Western Australian government

A four-day strike planned for Thursday by over 200 pilots from the fully owned Qantas subsidiaries Network Aviation and QantasLink, in Western

Australia, was called off at the last minute by their union after a request from the Western Australian Labor government.

The Australian Federation of Air Pilots (AFAP) accepted the government's request without calling any meetings of its members and directed them to "stay at work." The government claimed an approaching tropical cyclone was a threat to communities in the state's northwest and Pilbara region and residents may need to be evacuated by air.

The strike would have been the third in two weeks as part of a battle by pilots to get Qantas back to the negotiation table in their 18 month dispute over the airline's proposed enterprise agreement. The AFAP did not put any demand to the government or Qantas that negotiations should resume if industrial action was suspended.

Qantas walked away from any further negotiations after pilots voted down its proposed agreement three times. Qantas denied it is refusing to talk but applied to the Fair Work Commission (FWC), with a hearing due for March 14 and 15, declaring that negotiations are intractable. If the FWC agrees with Qantas, industrial action would have to stop, leaving the FWC to determine the terms and conditions in a new enterprise agreement.

Qantas' last pay offer was for a 25 percent pay increase, as well as yearly three percent increases in a three-year agreement. AFAP claimed that the 25 percent offer only applied to a hand full of pilots who are currently paid below the minimum award rate.

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 Qantas subsidiaries cover multiple routes across regional Western Australia, including fly-in-fly-out (FIFO) flights to multiple mines.

Tram drivers on Queensland's Gold Coast strike again for improved pay offer

G:Link tram drivers on Queensland's Gold Coast are continuing ad hoc strike action begun on December 22 in their pay dispute with transport operator KDR Gold Coast Trams. Transport Workers Union members walked out for 24 hours from 1 p.m. on Tuesday reducing services by half.

TWU members are in dispute over the company's proposed enterprise agreement. KDR has offered sub-inflation 4 percent annual pay increases which does not compensate for the increased cost of living. As well as a living wage, drivers want job security, part-time guarantees, privacy protection and better leave arrangements. KDR is refusing to meet with workers while they are engaged in industrial action.

Parliament House tradesmen strike for pay increase in Canberra

Public service tradesmen from the Department of Parliamentary Services (DPS) in Canberra downed tools on Thursday during negotiations over pay and classifications in a new enterprise agreement. The workers are represented by three unions, the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union, Construction, Forestry and Maritime Union and the Electrical Trades Union.

The unions say low wages and classifications are pricing DPS out of the permanent employee market and forcing it to rely on contractors at high market rates. DPS has refused to increase its pay rise above 11.2 percent

over three years, or 3.7 percent annual increases. This would maintain wages at a rate below industry standard.

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

Over 200 roadside mobile-speed camera workers employed by facilities services contractor Serco in Tullamarine, Melbourne, walked off the job for 24 hours on February 18 to demand a higher pay rise offer and improved safety in their new enterprise agreement. This was their fourth strike since beginning protected industrial action in December.

The Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) and Australian Services Union began negotiations for a new agreement in October but are now deadlocked on wages and safety. CPSU claimed that Serco's latest offer does not include weekend penalties and just shifts money forward from the total amount already offered in years two and three which was previously rejected overwhelmingly by members. Serco also declined the Fair Work Commission's suggestion to include performance in the dispute settlement clause.

A two-day strike in December was sparked after a roadside-speed camera operator was attacked by a group of people. According to the CPSU, Serco said they were offering no concessions to any of the unions' claims for improving safety.

The workers have not had a pay increase since November 2022. That was only 2 percent, well below the rise in the consumer price index at the time of 4.1 percent. The CPSU says some of its members are paid as little as \$26 an hour while having to endure threats and harassment for just doing their job.

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. A CPSU spokesperson said that due to Serco's intransigent opposition to workers' demands, more strikes are likely.

V/Line rail workers in Victoria hold seventh strike

V/Line operations staff, including conductors, train controllers, station and customer service staff and authorised officers, stopped work for four hours from 3 a.m. on Friday as part of a long-running campaign for a new work agreement. It was the seventh four-hour strike in two months by Rail Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) members. Train drivers, who are also RTBU members, did not participate in the strikes.

The RTBU has been attempting to do a deal with V/Line for a new agreement since June. Workers are demanding 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.

Public school cleaners in Victoria demand end to outsourcing

About 70 contract public school cleaners demonstrated outside Victoria's parliament house on Tuesday calling on the state Labor government to end using contractors to employ school cleaners. Cleaners,

who are covered by the United Workers Union (UWU), complained that each time a contract is signed, job insecurity, low wages, and worsening exploitation are further entrenched. Cleaners demanded their jobs be brought in-house.

Over 500 cleaners protested outside the Department of Education's Melbourne offices in December over the issue. That protest was in response to the state government suddenly signing up new contractors at its 214 schools with Serco and Tradflex. About 700 workers were sacked and forced to reapply for their jobs but with changed classifications, at lower wages, reduced holiday pay and under worse conditions.

Before the new contractors took over, cleaners were already paid very low wages of just \$47,562 per annum for full-time level one worker and \$51, 997 for a level-two worker. Serco had indicated they would not maintain existing wages and conditions, saying they intended to drop wages to the industry award minimum and cut the grade-two level.



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