

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

15 March 2024

The World Socialist Web Site invites workers and other readers to contribute to this regular feature.

Bangladeshi garment workers violently attacked by police in Gazipur

Garment workers from the Dutch Bangla Spinning Mills in Gazipur stopped work and protested outside their factory for two hours on March 9. They were demanding a salary increase as decreed in a November agreement between the government and garment factory owners.

Police attacked the workers with tear gas, sound grenades, and rubber bullets. Protesters said police chased and beat them brutally, using sound grenades to induce panic, resulting in injuries to some workers and pedestrians.

Workers said they had been demanding the new salary hike for over three months so that their monthly wage increased to 12,500 taka (\$US114). They also said they were not being paid their current salary on time which is only 6,000 taka.

India: Tamil Nadu nurses demonstrate over several demands

As part of a statewide protest nurses demonstrated at the Anna Bus Stand in Madurai, Tamil Nadu, on March 12 over several demands. The Tamil Nadu All Nurses Association wants an end to the random transfers to different places without nurses' consent, filling vacancies to reduce the workload, permanent jobs for contract nurses and defence of the public health system. Protesters complained that nurses in villages can not do proper justice to their jobs if they get transferred periodically.

Tamil Nadu Primary Cooperative Bank employees demand higher wages

Workers from branches of the Tamil Nadu Primary Cooperative Bank demonstrated at Tirunelveli and in Thoothukudi, Thenkasi and Kaniyakumari districts on March 11 to demand a wage increase.

The current wage of newly employed workers is a meagre 6,250 rupees (\$US75.40) a month. Other demands were transparency in the promotion and recruitment processes and no forced transfer to distant locations on these low wages. There are close to 30,000 workers from 4,500 branches of cooperative banks across the state.

Striking MRF tyre factory workers occupy their factory in Pondicherry

MRF tyre factory workers in Pondicherry downed tools and held a sit-in protest on March 11 to demand an increase in retirement age to 60. The mainstream media ignore the strike which was only reported on social media. There are MRF tyre plants in Chennai, Tamil Nadu, at Arakkonam and Thiruvottiyur.

Municipal sanitation workers at Bhubaneshwar, Orissa end strike

Sanitation workers from the Bhubaneshwar Municipal Corporation in Orissa state called off their three-day strike on Wednesday after the corporation mayor gave assurances concerning their demands. Workers want their monthly wage increased to 15,000 rupees (\$US180) and appointment of separate personnel for waste segregation. Workers said they would resume their strike if the assurances were not fulfilled in three days.

Punjab contract teachers demand permanent jobs

Special teachers who are members of the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan and Mid-day Meal Workers Union, protested outside the deputy commissioner's office in Jalandhar on Tuesday. They burnt effigies of leaders associated with Aam Admi, the state's ruling party. Workers said they were previously given assurances from the government that have not been fulfilled. The contract workers' major demand was for permanent government jobs. Workers said they would march to the chief minister's residence if their demands were not met.

Kochi fishermen protest new harbour toll

Fishermen at Kochi, a major port city in Kerala state, began a hunger strike protest on March 11 over Chellanam mini-fishing harbour's decision to impose a toll. They said the toll added to the already extreme burden facing fishers who were facing severe fish shortages and the rising cost of fishing operations.

The protest was called by the Swathantha Matsya Thozhilali Federation. The federation said that boat owners and workers, lorry

owners and workers, and small-time fish vendors are expected to join the protest.

Punjab Road Transport Corporation workers protest low pay

Contract workers employed by the Punjab Road Transport Corporation (PRTC) held a protest march on Monday near the deputy commissioner's office to demand a salary revision. Bus services were suspended during the protest.

Workers alleged that despite written assurances from the government to address their demands, management has consistently obstructed implementation of the necessary changes. They claimed that over the past year, salaries had decreased by approximately five percent and that instead of forming a committee to resolve these issues, they were being dismissed from their jobs.

On Tuesday, the PRTC and Punbus contract workers' union called off further planned action after PRTC accepted "a few demands." The union also claimed that corporation management had given a written assurance to reinstate blacklisted drivers and conductors at their last withdrawn salaries after getting the state government's approval.

Tamil Nadu power utility workers protest privatisation

Members of the Central Organisation of Tamil Nadu Electricity Employees and Tamil Nadu Retired Electricity Board Employees Association demonstrated outside the Tamil Nadu Generation and Distribution Corporation (Tangedco) in Madurai on Monday to protest moves to split the corporation into three entities. Workers argued that such a move would lead to the privatisation of the corporation, jeopardising workers' rights.

Workers also protested the use of mobile phones to record electricity meters from home, which would double their work without any incentives. Protesters also complained about planned job cuts of key personnel at substations.

Sri Lankan public sector workers protest

On Tuesday, non-academic workers from all seventeen public sector universities in Sri Lanka walked out on a two-day strike, impacting on education activities at all universities. Protesters demanded the elimination of pay disparities and immediate increase in allowances, which have been pending for eight years.

Postal workers struck for 24 hours from midnight Monday over the lack of building repairs, while Intercompany Employees Union members from the Hotel Employee Centre protested at the Galle Face roundabout in Colombo demanding a cut to pay-as-you-earn taxes.

Victorian ambulance paramedics begin industrial action for improved conditions

Emergency ambulance paramedics in Victoria will begin a campaign of industrial action on Monday as part of an enterprise bargaining dispute with the state Labor government. The action comes after paramedics overwhelmingly rejected a below-inflation nominal wage increase of 3 percent per annum, plus yearly lump sum payments of \$1,800.

The Victorian Ambulance Union (VAU) has limited industrial action to writing messages on ambulances, stopping work to speak to the media, refusing to collect billing details and activating beacons if they are ramped at hospitals for more than 40 minutes.

The VAU has been trying to reach a deal on improved pay and conditions with Ambulance Victoria and the government for over a year. This is being compounded by the government's wages policy which is restricting wage rises in the public sector to just 3 percent per annum. The current consumer price index for Victoria shows a rise of 3.8 percent.

As well as a wage increase, workers want increased staffing resources to relieve their heavy workload and improved end-of-shift management to end hours of forced overtime. Workers complained that it takes several days to recover from an 18-hour shift.

Sydney wire-drawn ferry workers continue industrial action

The Maritime Union of Australia (MUA), which covers workers on wire-drawn ferries in the outskirts of Sydney, called off strike action planned for March 18 after the ferry contract operator Birdon agreed to resume stalled negotiations over its proposed enterprise agreement. MUA directed members to implement low-level bans during negotiations that will have minimum effect on the public.

Workers began industrial action in January, including a 25-hour strike on February 19, in their dispute with Birdon and the New South Wales government over the company's proposed agreement.

Workers want improved conditions and equal pay for equal work, saying that they are among the lowest-paid ferry workers in Australia. Birdon had refused to meet with workers and said 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.

Workers want their new enterprise agreement to include work-life-balance rosters and basic entitlements, such as long service leave, domestic violence leave, improved training and safety, and adequate supply of clothing. According to the MUA Facebook page, the union wants \$46 per hour to bring ferry crews into line with NSW traffic controllers.

Qantas pilots in Western Australia strike again for pay rise

The Australian Federation of Air Pilots (AFAP) has notified Qantas Group its members from Qantas-owned subsidiaries Network Aviation and QantasLink, in Western Australia, planned to strike for 48 hours beginning Thursday. The action follows three previous strikes, including a three-day strike from February 28 by over 200 AFAP pilots in an attempt to get Qantas back to the negotiating table in their 18-month dispute over the airline's proposed enterprise agreement.

After pilots three times voted down the proposed agreement Qantas walked away from any further negotiations. AFAP claimed that the airline's 25 percent pay increase in its last offer only applied to a handful of pilots who are currently paid below the minimum award rate and that

Qantas had taken previously agreed terms off the bargaining table. The Qantas subsidiaries cover multiple routes across regional Western Australia, including fly-in-fly-out (FIFO) flights to multiple mines.

The pilots, who claim to be the lowest paid in the Qantas Group, want salaries and conditions improved to match those of other Qantas pilots and in line with the Air Pilots Award. Qantas has forced the dispute into the business-friendly Fair Work Commission (FWC) aiming to get a determination that the bargaining has become intractable. If the court rules in favour of Qantas the FWC can call an end to all industrial action and has the power to determine the outcome of a new agreement.

Fraser Coast Regional Council workers hold second protest over pay and job security

About 100 outdoor workers from the Fraser Coast Regional Council, Queensland, held their second demonstration at Harvey Bay on March 10 to demand an improved work agreement offer. The workers' unions, the Electrical Trades Union, Plumbing and Pipe Trades Employees Union and the Australian Workers Union began negotiations for a new agreement in November.

Workers rejected a pay rise offer of 14 percent over the life of the agreement. They want an increase that compensates for inflation, as well as improved conditions, no outsourcing of jobs, an increase in the workforce and adequate equipment.

Meanwhile, administrative staff at the council, covered by The Services Union (TSU), have begun voting on whether to take industrial action in their dispute for an improved work agreement. The TSU claimed that negotiations reached an impasse with the council refusing to improve its "inadequate" pay rise offer and refusing to consider any of the union's claims.

Workers rejected the council's 14 percent pay increase offer over a three-year agreement. TSU is demanding an increase above 15 percent to bring their members pay in line with other regional councils.

Tasmanian hospital nurses protest forced offloading of ambulance patients into emergency wards

Australian Nursing and Midwives Federation members at the Royal Hobart Hospital and Launceston General Hospital held 15-minute stop work meetings outside their hospitals on Friday and Thursday, respectively, in opposition to the Liberal state government's 60-minute ambulance offload procedure to be implemented on March 18.

The procedure will force doctors and nurses at hospital emergency departments (ED) to admit patients from ambulances that have been waiting to offload for 60 minutes. Nurses claim that forcing ambulance patients into overcrowded, understaffed, emergency wards pose a safety risk to the patient and existing patients in the ward.

Nurses are demanding the immediate revocation of the procedure and calling for the filling of all vacancies to meet baseline staffing minimums in each hospital, along with demands for improving patient flow from EDs into other wards.

Victorian power station emergency services workers impose bans

Eighteen emergency service officers employed at Victoria's Yallourn Power Station by contractor Programmed Maintenance Services (PMS) are taking industrial action in support of their claims for improved redundancy provisions in a new enterprise agreement (EA). The power station is operated by Energy Australia and is due to close in the next four years with the loss of hundreds of jobs.

Negotiations between the Mining and Energy Union (MEU) and PMS began in June last year. According to the union PMS has refused to meet workers' wage rise and improved redundancy package demands. Workers want a redundancy package on par with other workers at the power plant.

Industrial action includes bans on daily shift logs, inventory checks, debriefing forms, refueling vehicles, cleaning vehicles, higher duties and overtime.

Airport firefighters across Australia considering strike action

Firefighters at city and regional airports across Australia are voting whether to proceed with strike action over the Australian Public Service Commission's blanket public service pay deal. Negotiations between the Aviation Branch of the United Firefighters Union (UFUA) and Airservices Australia (AA) for a new enterprise agreement began in September.

Workers want a 20 percent pay increase over a three-year agreement. The AA has refused to offer an increase above the government's blanket limit of 11.2 percent, or annual increases of 3.7 percent. The current average consumer price index (CPI) for Australia showed a 4.1 percent.

A union spokesman said AA had refused to agree to a minimum staffing clause in the agreement that would overcome a chronic shortage of firefighters. "At airports across Australia, domestic and international flights have been taking off and landing without the required number of aviation firefighters and trucks to protect that aircraft's size and passenger capacity," he said.

New Zealand nurses protest over payment delays

Dozens of New Zealand nurses demonstrated opposite Christchurch Hospital's emergency department on Monday in response to long delays to Holidays Act remediation subsidies. Health workers said they are "sick of waiting" for authorities to settle overdue holiday and leave entitlement payments.

The labour inspectorate of the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment (MBIE) found there were problems with the then District Health Boards' payroll systems and its compliance with the Act. This meant some workers were receiving significantly lower leave compensation.

Employing authority Te Whatu Ora has had eight years to work out what people are owed and to pay it out. Nationwide, more than 302,000 workers are owed about \$2 billion.

University of the South Pacific staff vote to strike

Staff at the Fiji-based University of the South Pacific (USP) have voted by 63 percent in a secret ballot to strike over pay. Members of the

Association of University of the South Pacific Staff (AUSPS) and USP Staff Union are waiting on the Labour Ministry to approve the strike before it can legally go ahead. A 21-day strike notice is required.

AUSPS general-secretary Rosalia Fatiaki said staff missed out on salary adjustments in 2019 and 2022. She said the union had “not pushed” USP to adjust the salaries because they were told the university was in a financial crisis.

The regional university gave staff a two percent pay rise in October 2022, January 2023, and January this year. Fatiaki said it is “way below” the increase needed to match the cost of living. USP used to contribute an additional two percent above the national minimum for its superannuation contribution to senior staff, but this was reduced to the minimum during COVID-19 and has not returned.

Fatiaki said she hoped the USP vice-chancellor would “come to the table” and take staff’s grievances” seriously.” “We are going round and round and round,” she said.



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