

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: Bengaluru information technology workers demonstrate over jobs and work rights

Hundreds of information technology (IT) workers demonstrated in Bengaluru on March 16 to protest the forced exemption of employees from labour laws in the IT industry. The protest was called by the Karnataka State IT/ITeS Employees Union (KITU). Workers held banners and placards shouting slogans such as “long live workers’ unity” in front of the Karnataka Labour Commissioner’s office.

Workers complained of being treated as modern-day slaves, without any labour laws and strikes banned, and subjected to draconian indiscriminate hire and fire practices from employers. They have no job security when the market is in decline. In this year alone, 32,000 tech workers have lost their jobs in the state.

Punjab sewerage cleaners’ and pump operators’ protest delayed wages

Outsourced sewage cleaners and pump operators, represented by the Sewerage Board Workers Sangharsh Committee, demonstrated outside the Sewerage Board office in Sangrur on March 19 over the delay in paying wages. They are employed by a private company.

A worker told the media that they are supposed to be paid on the seventh day of each month but that wage payments are often delayed by up to 13 days. A Sewerage Board official tried to divert the protest and wipe their hands of any responsibility, insisting that the workers should take up their grievances with the private contractor.

Bus conductors in Maharashtra strike over delayed wages

On March 14, over 300 bus conductors employed by a private contractor at the Tapavan depot in Nashik stopped work to protest the non-payment of salaries. About 50 conductors resumed duties later in the afternoon. Conductors said they want timely salary disbursement and demanded Diwali bonuses for the past two years.

The city bus service is operated by Nashik Mahanar Parivahan

Mahamandal Limited (NMPML), which collaborates with private agencies to manage the bus service, with over 500 outsourced conductors. It has issued a show-cause notice to the concerned contractor who could face blacklisting.

Tamil Nadu former transport department workers protest unpaid pensions

Tamil Nadu State Transport Corporation Retired Employees’ Welfare Association members from the Erode Transport Department demonstrated on Monday demanding unpaid pensions and for resumption of the dearness allowance (DA), adjusted for inflation.

There are about 92,000 retired transport workers in the state who have been protesting over the same demands. Workers said they would surrender their voter IDs and boycott the parliament elections as a part of their protest if demands were not fulfilled.

Bellsonica auto parts factory workers continue protest in Manesar

Workers from the Bellsonica Auto Component India Private Limited factory at the Industrial Model Township (IMT) Manesar, in Haryana state, have been holding a sit-down hunger protest outside their factory since May 4, 2023. They are protesting the arbitrary terminations and suspensions of both permanent and contract workers. The Gurugram Municipal Corporation has taken action against a group of workers demonstrating in front of the Mini Secretariat in Gurugram since November 13.

Bellsonica, a first-tier vendor for the auto sector with clients like Maruti Suzuki, has been embroiled in multiple conflicts with workers since 2021. One incident involved the management filing a charge sheet against 33 workers for allegedly using fraudulent documentation to secure jobs. There is also an ongoing dispute regarding union membership for contract workers, which management claims is illegal.

Workers held a “tool down” protest in March last year which subsequently led to the suspension of 10 more workers. Tensions increased recently when management accused three union delegates of hindering production and suspended them. A union spokesman alleged that the suspensions are a part of a management plan to terminate all union members.

Bangladeshi garment workers in Gazipur protest police attack

Thousands of garment workers from the Seasons Dress factory in Gazipur demonstrated in front of the Department of Inspections for Factories and Establishments on Wednesday morning. They were protesting a violent attack on them by factory management and police and closure of the factory.

Workers said that at 7 p.m. on the previous day they demanded outstanding pay but only received a portion of that amount. They alleged that during the discussion the owners and police assaulted them and herded them out of the factory. When they returned on Wednesday morning, they found a closure notice on the gate stating that the factory had been closed indefinitely.

Protesters claimed that some workers had not been paid for up to three months and had expected to receive this before the Ramadan holidays. Factory owners are notorious for withholding wages before Ramadan to ensure their workers return to the factory. Workers said they find it difficult to pay rents and household expenses.

Sri Lankan customs workers impose bans over losing control of their incentive fund

Customs department workers imposed a work-to-rule on March 15 to protest the transfer of control of the Customs Officers Reward Fund to Sri Lanka's finance ministry. This is an ongoing dispute between customs workers and the government. Workers fear that incentive payments from the fund are in jeopardy.

According to the media, at least 4,000 containers have now been held up at the Colombo Port by the workers' action. A spokesman from the Container Drivers' Association said many containers have been blocked from clearance services, adding that it could obstruct other functions at the ports.

Cambodian garment workers oppose factory closure

Hundreds of workers from the Y&W garment factory in Phnom Penh have been protesting closure of their factory since February when it was shuttered, and the owner fled the country without paying wages and benefits. Nearly 5,000 people, mostly women, worked at the factory, of whom 500 were pregnant.

After getting a court order to seize the factory, the ministry of labour told protesters on Thursday that the government will pay the wages and benefits of all displaced workers on Saturday. The labour ministry advised workers to find other employment while waiting for a resolution to the Y&W factory case.

Metro Tasmania bus maintenance workers strike over low pay and under staffing

Bus mechanics at government-owned Metro Tasmania downed tools for 24 hours on March 15 to protest below industry-standard wages. The Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) said workers are being paid up to \$10 an hour below the industry rate.

The mechanics walked out for nearly a month on October 12 after rejecting Metro's pay increase offer of 10.22 percent in the first year of its

proposed enterprise agreement. Media reported that the state Liberal government paid outside contractors a total of \$160,000 as strikebreakers to keep the buses on the road and force an end to the industrial action.

Workers want a pay increase of \$10 per hour, more training for apprentices and increased recruitment to reverse a 30 percent staffing shortfall.

Successive state government funding cuts have created a shortage of mechanics and drivers that has persisted for several years. As a result, Metro has cut services on 180 bus routes in Hobart, Burnie and Launceston.

Metro announced that in the next round of negotiations it will offer pay increases up to 17 percent over three years, which it will put to a vote. An AMWU spokesman said the workers had already indicated they would reject the offer.

Construction workers at Simpec in Western Australia strike for a better pay deal

Over 100 workers from construction company Simpec walked off its Kwinana building site, in Perth, on Monday. Construction Forestry Maritime and Energy Union (CFMEU) members were to strike for 24 hours but decided to extend the strike for the week, after rejecting Simpec's proposed enterprise agreement for the third time.

Negotiations for a new agreement began in August. The union claimed it is trying to reach a deal that includes a pay increase that compensates for the rising cost of living, an end to baseline wages, which it claims undercuts members' pay at other sites, restoration of annual leave loading and site allowance.

Transgrid electricians in NSW and ACT strike again for pay rise

Over 400 electricians from Transgrid, a consortium-owned power transmission company in New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory, walked off the job for 24 hours on March 15 in opposition to the company's proposed pay offer in a new enterprise agreement. It was their second 24-hour strike in five weeks over the issue. Workers have also imposed bans on unlocking and locking padlocks at power substations and are refusing to use Transgrid credit cards to purchase goods for the company.

The Electrical Trades Union and Transgrid have been in negotiation for a new agreement since October. Workers want an 8 percent pay rise each year for three years. Transgrid is offering only 5 percent in year one, followed by 4 percent in the following two years. Workers rejected the offer, with the union claiming that their wages since 2019 have increased by only 8 percent even though inflation was 18 percent over the same period.

Monash University educators strike for better pay and conditions

National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) members from Monash University in Melbourne walked off the job for 24 hours at 12 noon on Wednesday in their long-running dispute over the university's proposed enterprise agreement. The union and Monash have dragged out

negotiations for nearly 18 months.

The current NTEU-negotiated four-year enterprise agreement covering most workers expired in June 2022, with a final pay increase of only 1 percent. In that year, inflation peaked at around 7 percent, meaning that any future pay increase will need to compensate for what was a real 6 percent pay cut.

The NTEU is demanding a pay increase of only 4.5 percent for this year. Other demands are for improved job security, including conversion for fixed-term staff and 600 new ongoing teaching positions, a cap on academic workloads and a right to work from home.

The union claimed that workloads are out of control and over half of the staff are employed on insecure contracts. It alleged that the university has stolen \$10 million in wages and another potential \$9 million is being sued for in the Federal Court.

Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology educators to strike for better pay and conditions

As part of a long-running pay dispute, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) has notified the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) that its members will strike from 12.30 p.m. on March 25 to 12 midday, March 28. Industrial action began in August when over 1,100 NTEU members approved taking protected industrial action, including strike action and bans in support of their demands in a new Enterprise Agreement.

Next weeks' four-day strike follows a two-day walkout in October and one-day action in September. The union and RMIT have dragged out negotiations for over 20 months. RMIT workers have not had a pay rise since their current agreement expired in June 2021.

Workers rejected RMIT's proposed agreement, which included sub-inflation 3.5 percent annual wage rises, extension of the new agreement to four years and 13 percent superannuation. RMIT management also wants a new sessional staff category, increased teaching and work hours, as well as making changes to classification level testing. NTEU is seeking a 5 percent pay increase.

Currently workers come under two enterprise agreements, the RMIT University Enterprise Agreement 2018 and RMIT Vocational Education Workplace Agreement 2019. RMIT is refusing the union's demand that all workers be covered by a single agreement.

A priority claim of workers is for secure employment. About 50 percent of vocational educators are casual and living precariously. Many are forced to take two or more jobs to survive.

TAFE educators across Victoria voting in strike ballot

The Australian Education Union's (AEU) Victorian Branch has gained approval from the Fair Work Commission to conduct a ballot of its members working at TAFE (Technical And Further Education) colleges throughout Victoria asking them to consider taking protected industrial action that could include strikes and work bans. Twelve TAFE colleges with a total of 4,500 educators are involved.

The AEU is in dispute with the Victorian Labor government over its proposed TAFE enterprise agreement. The union says it has been negotiating with the government for two years but been blocked by its public sector 3 percent pay-rise cap. TAFE workers want a reduction in teaching hours, improved access to high-level teaching qualifications and

a wage rise that will bring them into parity with Victoria's school teachers. That will mean a wage rise of \$7,742 this year, an increase of more than 7 percent.

The government has refused to budge from its 3 percent wage cap and proposes that any increase be offset by educators working longer hours and taking bigger classes. These are demands that the teachers say will only increase the excessive and exhausting workload they currently are forced to endure in an already understaffed and underfunded education system.



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