

# 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.*

## **Bangladeshi garment workers in Gazipur protest factory closure**

Over 500 Bangladeshi garment workers from Denis Knitwear in Gazipur passed their seventh day of a sit-down protest on May 11. They were demanding the immediate reopening of their factory and an end to the harassment of workers. On the same day they held a rally outside the national press club in Dhaka.

Factory authorities suddenly closed the factory without notice during the Eid vacation on April 21 without settling outstanding wages owed to its approximately 2,000 employees. One worker said the owner shut down the factory after the Eid holidays and removed equipment. “When we returned, we were threatened, beaten, and forced to resign,” the worker said.

On May 9, police blocked protesters when they attempted to march to the prime minister’s office. Union representatives were later allowed to submit a memorandum. The Bangladesh Garment and Sweaters Workers Trade Union Centre called for factory authorities to implement a tripartite agreement reached earlier between owners, the government, and workers.

## **India: Tripura brick kiln workers protest non-payment of wages and other issues**

Hundreds of brick kiln workers, including many migrant workers, gathered in Agartala, capital of the state of Tripura, and demonstrated outside the labour commissioner’s office on May 13. They raised several issues, including the non-payment of wages, the lack of clean drinking water and food at the workplace and no available medical treatment for workers. A Tripura Brick Kiln Workers Union representative said the workers had not been paid for about six weeks.

## **Milma dairy factory workers in Kerala strike over delayed promotions**

Processing workers from the government owned Milk Dairy (Milma) factories in Thiruvananthapuram, Kollam and Pathanamthitta in South Kerala walked out for half the day on Tuesday to protest delays in promotions. The workers are involved in processing, pasteurisation,

packaging and distribution.

The Indian Trade Union Congress and the Centre for Indian Trade Union called the strike but hastily called it off following a vague, non-binding assurance from dairy authorities that the promotions will be taken forward in the coming meeting with the board of directors.

## **Air India Express cabin crews union call off strike under government pressure**

About 300 cabin crew from low-cost airline Air India Express, a subsidiary of Air India owned by the Tata group, called in sick and switched off their phones on May 7, leading to mass cancellation of flights. The workers were protesting modification of their compensation package and new employment terms.

The airline responded by sacking 25 cabin crew. The Air India Express Employees Union accused management of “departure from commitments,” while the Regional Labour Commissioner in New Delhi reportedly pointed to “blatant violations of labour laws” by the company and said staff’s grievances were genuine.

The chief labour commissioner intervened on May 9 and the union accepted a deal in which the airline agreed to withdraw the termination notices of the 25 sacked workers if all employees returned to work. Media and the union have not revealed if the workers’ original grievances were resolved.

## **Victoria Hospital contract workers in Karnataka protest terminations**

Contract ward attendants at the government-run Victoria Hospital in Bengaluru held an indefinite sit-down demonstration on hospital premises on May 8 to protest the arbitrary termination of 56 workers by hospital authorities. The Karnataka General Labour Union, affiliated to AICCTU-All India Central Council of Trade Unions, organised the protest.

Medical officers at the hospital said the previous contractor had employed the protesting workers but with the arrival of a new contractor, a fresh batch of workers were recruited. Police intervened on May 11 and detained the protesters.

## **Pakistan: Daily wage workers at Swat province private hospital demonstrate over wage cuts**

Daily wage workers from the Saidu Group of Teaching Hospitals in Swat province, protested the consistent delays in payment of their wages on Tuesday. Holding placards bearing slogans with their demands, workers said their monthly salary was supposed to be the government-fixed minimum of 32,000 rupees (\$US115) but the hospital only paid 25,000 rupees. They said hospital administration threatened them with termination when they complained.

### **Sri Lankan village level service officers maintain strike for improved allowances**

Around 12,000 Grama service officers (representatives of the Sri Lankan village-level government) are maintaining a sick-leave strike they began on May 6 over several demands. Workers from Kandy, Central Province, Ratnapura and Kegalle in Sabaragamuwa Province, Galle and Kalutara in Southern Province, and Chilaw in the North-Western Province have closed their offices. They are demanding uniform, office and field-visit travel allowances.

### **Sri Lankan government health workers strike**

Government hospital medical workers began a strike campaign on May 9 in seven provinces to demand the DAT (disturbance, availability, and transport) allowance. Strikers include workers from all hospitals in Kandy in Central Province and Ratnapura and Kegalle in Sabaragamuwa Province, and Chilaw in the North-Western Province.

Workers said inadequate allowances are affecting a diverse array of health professionals, such as radiology and laboratory technicians, pharmacists, midwives, dental surgeons, public health inspectors, and entomology officers.

### **Non-academic workers remain on strike in Sri Lanka after three weeks**

About 13,000 non-academic workers from 17 government universities across Sri Lanka have been on strike since May 2, stopping all essential services and causing students to leave the campuses. Workers have formed pickets at several universities.

Their demands include a 25 percent increase in the monthly compensation allowance, a 15 percent rise in their salaries in line with the rest of the state sector, an end to government cuts to state universities, the recruitment of more staff and no more cuts to their pension fund.

Executive-levels category employees began a work-to-rule on Wednesday to demand salaries commensurate with their service and several other demands.

### **Australia: Wilmar Sugar workers in Queensland strike again for pay rise**

About 700 workers from eight mills owned by Wilmar Sugar,

Australia's largest sugar producer and located on Queensland's east coast, stopped work for 12 hours on Monday. It followed a 12-hour strike on May 9 to demand higher pay. The Australian Manufacturing Workers Union, Australian Workers Union and the Electrical Trades Union are in dispute with Wilmar over its proposed enterprise agreement. The unions claimed Wilmar made a revised offer on Monday, but it was worse than their previous offer.

Wilmar offered a 13.75 percent increase over four years (5 percent in the first year backdated to December 2023). The workers' last pay rise was 2.25 percent in December 2022 and well below the annual CPI (consumer price index) rate at the time of 7.8 percent.

The current CPI is 4.2 percent with rents and food inflation much higher, meaning workers need a pay rise in a four-year agreement well above 16.8 percent to keep up with inflation and compensate for previous below-inflation rises. The unions want a 28 percent increase over four years, including 12 percent in the first year. The AWU claimed that Wilmar is refusing to hold further negotiations unless workers revise their position and ask for less.

### **New South Wales public school cleaners protest low pay and job insecurity**

Over 100 contract public school cleaners and cleaners of state government buildings from across New South Wales rallied in Parramatta, west of Sydney, on Tuesday to protest low wages and job insecurity. Workers called for the Labor state government to "end the broken contract model."

The United Workers Union (UWU) report that 76 percent of cleaners delay medical treatment due to low wages, 89 percent said they had to cut back on heating, and over half said they have missed meals simply because they have run out of money. Protesters said privatisation of state public cleaning services had driven them into low-waged casual jobs with intolerable workload and no job security.

The UWU's campaign does not involve an industrial action but out-of-workhours protests to call on the state Labor government to bring their jobs back into the public service.

### **Ventia facility management workers at defence barracks in Victoria strike**

About 90 workers from facility management contractor Ventia went on strike at three military defence barracks in Victoria on Wednesday to demand higher pay and "fairer" conditions. The Australian Workers Union, representing workers at the Puckapunyal Military Base, HMAS Cerberus, and RAAF Williams Base, claimed these workers are the lowest-paid in the industry and are often forced to sacrifice their annual leave during the Christmas shutdown.

As well as a pay rise workers want an improved rostered-day-off system to ensure equitable access to leave. Ventia is refusing to alter current conditions.

### **Health professionals at major Tasmanian hospital walk out**

About ten health professionals, including radiographers, sonographers and nuclear medicine technologists, at the Royal Hobart Hospital (RHH) walked off the job on May 10 and rallied outside the hospital to protest “increasingly dangerous” staffing levels.

Health and Community Services Union (HACSU) members said vacancies in the medical imaging department have reached an all-time high of 30 percent, putting patients at a greater risk of missing out on vital medical scans.

The union claimed private health services are paying \$10 to \$15 an hour more for health professionals, leading to workers moving to the mainland seeking higher pay. Workers are calling on the state Liberal government to fix the wage disparity and inadequate staffing.

each other and the wider working class. The nurses’ protest was kept away from a strike two days earlier by 2,500 young doctors who are taking action for better pay and conditions.



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### **Ballarat council workers begin industrial action for new work agreement**

Over 200 Australian Services Union (ASU) members from the Ballarat City Council in central Victoria demonstrated on city’s town hall step on Tuesday for an improved new enterprise agreement. Workers from waste collection, parks and gardens, childcare, leisure, parking, administration, art gallery, libraries, tourism and customer service departments had voted in April to take action following nine months of failed negotiations.

In March they overwhelmingly rejected the council’s sub-inflation wage offer and its plans for changes to childcare rosters. The council’s latest pay offer on May 8 was 3.5 percent annual increases in a three-year agreement, which is real pay cut compared to the current consumer price index rate in Victoria of 3.8 percent.

Workers want wage parity with workers employed by the Greater Geelong and Greater Bendigo councils who they say get \$4,000 more a year. ASU’s pay claim is for a 5 percent pay increase or \$62 (whichever is the greater) from September 2023, 6 percent or \$65 in June 2024 and 6 percent or \$70 in June 2025.

### **New Zealand nurses protest staff shortages**

Hundreds of New Zealand nurses protested around the country on May 9, waving signs and handing out pamphlets warning of a chronic shortage of 4,000 nurses in public hospitals. The rallies were organised by the NZ Nurses Organisation (NZNO) to demand extra government funding in this month’s budget.

Health NZ-Te Whatu Ora data showed over a quarter of nursing shifts fell short of safe staffing targets in the year to December. Patient care is being compromised in hospitals and desperate people are being left waiting for pain relief and in soiled beds, nurses told Radio NZ.

Burwood Hospital spinal injury unit nurse Debbie Handisides said nurses were burnt out and scared. “We’ve got staff injuries because they’re burnt out. They’re leaving work tired. They’re arriving back tired,” she said.

NZNO chief executive Paul Goulter said the healthcare system was in crisis, with staffing shortages extending to aged care, primary health and general practices. However, the union is complicit in this situation. Last August the NZNO pushed through a below-inflation pay settlement after cancelling a one-day strike. Goulter admitted the deal did not provide a wage rise that meets the cost of living and was “pretty light” on minimum staff to patient ratios.

The unions are meanwhile keeping health sector workers isolated from