

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

24 May 2024

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

Indonesian migrant workers in Taiwan demand abolition of broker system

About 30 Indonesian migrant workers gathered outside the Indonesian Economic and Trade Office (IETO) in Taipei on May 19 to demand better protection of their rights and the abolition of the broker system. Workers from the caregiving and manufacturing sectors held signs saying, “Stop overcharging” and “Sunday service every week” directed at brokers and the IETO, which they said treated them poorly.

The broker system was legalised in 1992 to supposedly manage workers and help them process any necessary documents. Workers complain that their calls for assistance and grievances are being ignored. They want the IETO to increase the frequency of services from one day a month to every Sunday, the day of the week when most migrant workers can take their days off.

There are over 750,000 registered migrant workers in Taiwan as of November 2023. Most are labourers from Indonesia, the Philippines, Vietnam and Thailand. Brokerage fees, including the costs paid to agencies by potential employees to be placed into a job, can be prohibitively high, placing many of these workers in debt. Once they arrive in Taiwan, workers might find that their work is vastly different from what they were originally told, and that they lack the freedom to switch jobs.

One female worker at the rally told the media, “When I was in Indonesia, I signed a contract to take care of an elderly person. However, when I arrived in Taiwan, I was assigned to work on a farm,” she said.

Unable to endure the pain in her back from shovelling dirt from dawn to dusk every day, she asked the broker to allow her to change jobs. “They threatened me, saying that if I switched to another employer, I would have to pay tens of millions of Indonesian rupiah as penalties for violating the contract,” she added.

South Korean construction workers protest faulty brake systems on concrete mixing vehicles

About 20 members of the Korean Construction Workers’ Union (KCWU) held a rally and press conference in Seoul on Tuesday to demand authorities inspect Tata Daewoo’s mixer trucks for defects and to prevent further tragic accidents.

Workers said defects in the company’s concrete mixer trucks braking

systems had caused several accidents, including a 13-car accident in Seoul which killed one driver and left 16 people injured on March 29. Responding to media claims that the accident was caused by the driver, another worker said that the driver had overturned his vehicle because the brakes did not work when the vehicle was going downhill near Seokgye Station.

The KCWU also reported that last month another driver of Tata Daewoo’s Novus mixer truck was forced to crash into a wall to stop his accelerating vehicle at a factory in Goyang, Gyeonggi Province, because the brake system malfunctioned. It claimed that Tata Daewoo’s service centre denied any defects in the vehicles and refused to compensate the trucker.

India: Tea plantation workers in Assam protest unpaid wages and harsh conditions

Tea plantation workers at Dibrugarh, Assam, stopped work and demonstrated in the city on Tuesday to protest three months of unpaid wages and rations and harsh working conditions. The protest, which was coordinated by the Assam Tea Workers Union, coincided with International Tea Day.

Workers from different tea estates owned by the Andrew Yule group marched through Lahowal before converging on the Basmatia tea estate. They chanted slogans against the government and tea estate management. They also burned effigies of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, State Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma and State Tea Tribal Welfare Minister Sanjoy Kishan and tea estate management.

Jindal Stainless Steel plant workers at Vizag, Andhra Pradesh protest lockout and job cuts

Jindal Stainless Steel plant workers at Vizag demonstrated on May 17 over a sudden lockout at the company’s Kottavalasa plant. Workers protested outside the manager’s office wearing black badges. They said 57 workers had been laid off and that contract workers would be left without jobs as part of the company’s cuts to shore up profits.

Industry sources claim that the losses and lower market prices were the reason for the sudden lockout. Jindal Stainless Steel, which is India’s biggest stainless-steel maker by volume, posted a consolidated net profit of 5.01 billion rupees (\$US60 million) for the quarter ended March 31.

Clean Andhra Pradesh workers strike over unpaid wages

Over 220 private agency workers employed in the Clean Andhra Pradesh program at the Vijayawada Municipal Corporation stopped work on May 18 to protest two months of unpaid wages. The poverty-stricken workers are paid 14,000 rupees (\$US168) per month but actually receive only 12,500 rupees after deductions.

Workers told the media that, despite repeated representations to the agency and the municipality, they have not been given any relief. They intend to remain on strike until their wages are paid.

Kerala: Kochi City workers protest water utility privatisation

Members of the All-India Trade Union Congress and the Centre for Indian Trade Unions protested in Kochi earlier this week against privatisation of the Kochi Water Authority. The workers condemned Kerala's Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan who has introduced pro-investor policies.

The 25.11 billion rupees (\$US300 million) privatisation of Kochi Water Authority and extension of water distribution at the state capital Thiruvananthapuram was given to the French multinational company, Suez India.

Goa chemical factory workers protest the death of a co-worker

Hundreds of chemical factory workers at Corlim in Goa rallied outside their factory on Monday to protest the death of a co-worker and to demand compensation for his family on Monday.

Krishna Mohan, a 24-year-old immigrant worker from Uttar Pradesh, died instantly on May 16 after a window slab fell on him, causing him to fall on a sharp object and severing the arteries in his throat. Workers ended the strike after management paid compensation into Mohan's family account.

Blinkit App delivery workers in New Delhi strike over new pay structure

Blinkit App grocery delivery workers went on strike in Mumbai and New Delhi on Tuesday to oppose management's decision to cut weekends and prime time wages. The gig workers are paid just 50 rupees (\$US0.6) for a delivery, out of which they pay about 25 to 30 rupees a day to Blinkit. Management responded to the walk out by demanding that about 30 workers who participated in the strike hand in their Blinkit IDs.

Young doctors at Pakistani government hospitals protest in Lahore

Young Doctors Association (YDA) members stopped work and demonstrated at various hospitals in Lahore, the Punjab capital, on Tuesday over several issues. They blocked the main roads outside the

Mayo and the Sir Ganga Ram health facilities and the Lahore General Hospital.

Young doctors are opposed to the government health policy, pointing out that all teaching hospitals face an acute shortage of medicines. The YDA has demanded the reinstatement of the service structure, abolition of the daily wage system and recruitment of additional permanent or contract health staff.

Bangladesh: Protesting auto-rickshaw drivers injured in brutal Dhaka police attack

At least 13 auto-rickshaw drivers suffered injuries and four were hospitalised when police attacked their protest at the Mirpur 10 crossing in Dhaka on May 19. Workers blocked the road, stopping traffic for nearly six hours. Protests were also held at Mirpur 11, Mirpur 1, Agargaon and Sabujbagh areas. Protesters were demanding withdrawal of the government-imposed ban on battery-run auto-rickshaws.

Police took away batteries from 25 auto-rickshaws and confiscated power supplies from 11 garages on May 18, triggering the protests. Three rickshaw drivers were detained.

The ban was imposed on May 15, following instructions from the Bangladeshi road transport and bridges minister. The ban was lifted on Monday following an intervention by the prime minister.

Sri Lankan public sector workers continue strikes and protests over wages and privatisation

Prison workers across Sri Lanka began a sick-leave strike on Monday for a 25,000-rupee (\$US83) wage rise. Workers have agreed to accept the justice minister's lesser offer of 15,000 rupees per month if it is fully documented.

Non-academic workers from 17 government universities across Sri Lanka remain on strike after walking out on May 1. They are demanding reversal of a 15 percent salary cut imposed on non-academic employees, rectification of salary anomalies, payment of allowances and other facilities promised by the government.

On Tuesday, hundreds of workers from the BOI (Board of Investment) at Katunayake and World Trade Centre in Western Province, and BOI Polgahawela in North-Western Province conducted lunch-break protests outside their respective workplaces to oppose the sale of BOI to private investors and for withdrawal of the government's draft Economic Transformation Bill.

Public sector health workers walked out on strike in the Western Province the same day, protesting outside the Colombo General Hospital and other hospitals to demand Disturbance, Availability and Transport allowances.

New South Wales ambulance paramedics strike over rostering

Emergency paramedics from the Rutherford ambulance station, a suburb of Newcastle north of Sydney, stopped work on Tuesday in a dispute over rostering. Paramedics answered phones and attended only emergency callouts.

Health Services Union (HSU) members complained that although NSW Ambulance had recently allocated additional staff and ambulances to Rutherford in response to a sharp increase in population in that area of coverage, the extra staff and vehicles were being used almost every day to cover shortfalls in other regions.

The HSU said one of the night shift crews would be pulled forward to the afternoon shift, making it difficult to send them outside the local area. On Tuesday, however, when two paramedics showed up for their afternoon shift as part of the planned union action, management sent them home. Other paramedic crews on that shift walked in support of their stood-down fellow workers.

Unions reduce striking workers' wage demands at Wilmar Sugar mills in Queensland

Three unions covering over 700 workers at Wilmar Sugar's eight mills in Queensland have lowered workers' wage rise demand in negotiations for a new enterprise agreement. Australian Manufacturing Workers Union, Australian Workers Union and the Electrical Trades Union members have held three 12-hour strikes since May 9 in opposition to the company's proposed agreement.

Wilmar has slightly lifted its pay offer from 13.75 percent over four years to 14.25 percent (a miniscule 0.5 percent improvement), which workers rejected. The unions made a much larger concession and reduced their members' original pay demand from 25 percent over four years to only 22 percent.

The last pay rise of 2.25 percent, agreed by the unions in December 2022, was well below the annual consumer price index of 7.8 percent at that time. The current CPI is 4.2 percent, but with rents and food inflation much higher, workers will need a pay rise well above 16.8 percent to keep up with inflation and compensate for years of union-imposed wage restraint.

Industrial court orders Endeavour Energy electricians to suspend industrial action

On May 16, the Fair Work Commission (FWC) ordered electricians employed by power retailer and distributor Endeavour Energy in New South Wales to suspend for three days planned industrial action, in order to protect the profits of an affected Endeavour customer. Endeavour Energy, which privatised in 2011, operates the electrical distribution network for Greater Western Sydney.

Agribusiness giant Manildra successfully applied to the FWC for orders stopping months of industrial action by Electrical Trades Union (ETU) members, arguing it had cost the business more than \$1.2 million in extra power bills to keep its grain processing plant at Shoalhaven, south of Sydney, operational. Manildra complained that the action prevented it from engaging electricians to start new gas turbines to power the plant, forcing it to purchase electricity from the spot market each day since April 9.

The ETU is in dispute with Endeavour Energy over its proposed new work agreement. The union wants annual 8 percent pay increases over three years, claiming that wages at Endeavour have only increased by 10.5 percent since 2019. In February, workers rejected Endeavour's pay rise offer of an upfront \$1,000 payment followed by pay increases of 5.25 percent from July 1 this year, 3.25 percent for 2025 and 2.75 percent for

2026. The current consumer price index rate is 4.2 percent.

Educators at Ipswich Girls Grammar take first ever industrial action

Teachers and school support staff at Ipswich Girls Grammar School (IGGS) in southeast Queensland took industrial action on Monday, the first since the school opened in 1892. The action by members of the Independent Education Union (IEU) includes not attending staff meetings or being available for any work during scheduled breaks.

The IEU said negotiations for a new work agreement began in August, but that management had failed to address key issues, including wages and leave entitlements.

The educators' major demands in the next agreement are for an automatic cost-of-living allowance and flexible access to leave.

Saputo milk-processing workers in Tasmania still on strike action for pay parity

Maintenance workers at Saputo's milk-processing factory in Burnie walked out on Monday halfway through their shift for the seventh time in a month. The 22 workers are members of the Australian Manufacturing Workers' Union (AMWU) and the Communication Electrical Plumbing Union (CEPU) and have been trying for nine months to reach agreement with Saputo for a pay increase in a new work agreement.

Workers say they are paid up to 21 percent less than their Saputo co-workers in rural Victoria, with whom they want their pay brought into line. Saputo's last pay offer was for a 9.5 percent rise in the first year, but this was well below the rise of 21 percent that workers are demanding.

The disparity for Tasmanian workers is widespread, with wages averaging \$220 less per week than their counterparts on the mainland—a disparity that has continued for decades unchallenged by the unions. The disparity is even more acute for Burnie workers, facing prohibitively higher house prices, rising rents and utility bills increasing by up to 20 percent. Saputo's Burnie plant is one of Australia's largest specialty cheese production plants.

TAFE teachers in Victoria escalate industrial action

Victoria's Technical and Further Education (TAFE) teachers have voted to intensify their campaign of industrial action begun in April for a new enterprise agreement. The Australian Education Union (AEU) said its members' action will include limited stop works in June and July, a 24-hour statewide strike in August and further bans on top of those already imposed in April.

The action follows two years of failed negotiations with the state Labor government for higher pay and reduced workloads. Teachers want wage parity with similarly qualified teachers at state-funded schools. According to the union, TAFE teachers in July will be paid \$7,742 a year or 7 percent less than similarly experienced teachers. They also want an end to chronic understaffing, unpaid and excessive overtime and high teacher turnover.

The latest Productivity Commission Report on Government Services says that the Victorian Labor government has underfunded TAFE for over a decade, making its facilities the worst funded in Australia.



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