

# 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.*

## South Korea: 30,000 public sector health professionals threaten strike action

About 30,000 Korean Health and Medical Workers' Union members began voting on Monday on whether to strike for a pay rise. The public sector health professionals from 62 hospitals are demanding a 6.4 percent pay rise. The union told the media that if negotiations with hospital managements fail to narrow differences workers will strike on August 29.

A union representative said striking will be difficult as nurses and medical workers are in essential services and by law could be forced to remain at work.

## India port workers plan national strike

The All-India Port Workers' Federation (AIPWF), which covers 20,000 workers from several unions, has called an indefinite nationwide strike at India's 12 major seaports starting on August 28. It follows three years of failed negotiations with employers and the government on pay and pension reform. The negotiating parties met seven times since December 2021 after the current wage agreement expired.

The AIPWF said the strike of the low-waged port workers could be avoided if the government and port management accepted their demands for pay scale revisions, payment of arrears and protection of exiting benefits.

In the twelve months up to March 31 this year, India exported goods worth \$437 billion and imported goods worth \$677 billion through its ports.

## Protesting Maharashtra Anganwadi workers detained by police

About 170 Anganwadi (childcare) workers were manhandled and detained by police on August 16 when they protested on the Nagpur Highway, blocking traffic. The protest was part of a series of actions in their struggle for higher wages and social security. Workers planned to protest again on August 21 at Samvidham Square.

Anganwadi workers in Vidharbha region protested on August 10 with similar demands. That protest was also brutally attacked by police.

## Tamil Nadu garment workers demand unpaid wages

Around 200 of the 500 employees at Sheela Rani Textiles garment factory in Samayanallur, near Madurai, surrounded the factory on Sunday to demand unpaid wages totalling more than 64.5 million rupees (\$US768,000).

The workers were employed in the factory until 2006 when it was taken over by a new owner and renamed. Although a court case at the time of the takeover resulted in mediation with factory management who agreed to pay compensation to the workers, it remains unpaid.

## Bangladeshi temporary rail workers demand permanent jobs

Hundreds of Bangladeshi temporary rail-crossing gatekeepers staged a sit-down protest outside railway headquarters in Dhaka on August 17 demanding to be made permanent at the state-run Bangladesh Railway. Following assurance given by railway officials that their demand would be processed in 40 days they ended the protest.

Over 1,500 gatekeepers were appointed in 2018 under two Bangladesh Railway initiated projects to improve safety at level crossings. They had earlier held several protests over the same demands.

## Pakistan: Private sector workers in Islamabad oppose tax increases

Several hundred private sector workers protested at Islamabad's Blue Area on August 16 against the recent tax rises. The Pakistan government's Finance Bill 2024–25 contains significant tax increases with direct taxes expected to rise by 48 percent and indirect taxes by 35 percent.

## Essential Energy electricians in New South Wales strike for higher wages

Over 1,800 Electrical Trades Union (ETU) members at more than 20 Essential Energy depots in regional New South Wales are maintaining rolling one-hour stoppages and work bans begun after rejecting the company's proposed enterprise agreement.

The workers want 8 percent annual pay rises over three years. Their last pay increase of only 2.5 percent was in July 2023 when the consumer

price index was up 6.6 percent. Essential Energy is a state-owned power utility that builds and operates electricity services to over 1,500 regional, rural and remote communities.

### **Western Australian natural gas pipeline controllers start industrial action**

Panel operators on the privatised Dampier to Bunbury Natural Gas Pipeline (DBNGP) in Western Australia began rolling industrial action on Friday. They are in dispute with the pipeline operator AGIG (Australian Gas Infrastructure Group) for a new enterprise agreement.

When negotiations stalled, the ten panel operators, who are members of the Australian Workers Union (AWU), voted unanimously on August 9 for protected industrial action. This can include indefinite stoppages—from 15 minutes to one hour—and bans on operational and administration duties.

Workers rejected AGIG's latest pay offer last week. The AWU claims DBNGP is demanding the right to unilaterally change rosters anytime. AGIG is owned by Hong Kong's CK Group. The pipeline is 1,539 kilometres long with ten compressor stations. It transfers natural gas from the offshore gas fields in the north to the south of the state for industrial and household consumption. It was privatised by the Western Australian state government in 1998.

### **Etex plasterboard factory workers' strike continues in New South Wales**

Thirty-eight Electrical Trades Union (ETU) and Construction Forestry Maritime and Energy Union members at the Etex plasterboard factory in Matraville, a suburb of Sydney, have been on strike since August 12 to demand higher pay. They are maintaining a daily picket outside the factory.

Workers want 6 percent annual pay increases in a three-year agreement and an increase to the minimum 11.5 percent superannuation employer's contribution. They have rejected Etex's pay increase offer of 4.5 percent in the first year, 4 percent in the second year and a \$2,500 one-off bonus. On Tuesday, Etex issued its proposed agreement for a second vote, which the unions predict will again be rejected by workers.

### **Ampol aviation refuellers at Sydney Airport hold second strike**

Fifty Ampol aviation refuellers at Sydney Airport stopped work for four hours on each of three shifts Friday to demand improved wages and permanent jobs in a new enterprise agreement. Transport Workers Union and Ampol have failed to reach agreement after nearly seven months of negotiations.

The refuellers want comparable pay with workers at Ampol's competitors, guaranteed part-time hours and a preference for full-time jobs. Ampol provides only 24 full-time positions for its 68 employees. The workers have received only a 3.5 percent pay increase over the last three years, a real-terms pay cut.

### **Ramsay Health Care nurses continue industrial action**

New South Wales Nurses and Midwives Association (NSWNMA) members from Ramsay Health Care continue to take ad hoc isolated industrial action with a three-hour statewide stoppage on Monday. Ramsay nurses and midwives from Wollongong Private, Nowra Private and Southern Highlands Private hospitals walked out for four hours and protested in Wollongong. NSWNMA members from the Lake Macquarie Private Hospital stopped work for four hours and imposed overtime bans on July 29.

The strikes are in addition to previous action by 2,600 NSWNMA members at Ramsay's 70 hospitals. NSWNMA has allowed negotiations to drag on since March last year.

Nurses rejected Ramsay's pay offer of 11 percent over a three-year agreement, saying they are currently paid up to 14 percent less than their Queensland counterparts and want an improved offer. Their last pay rise was a meagre 2.4 percent in July 2022.

The NSWNMA is calling for an 18 percent pay rise over three years and improvements to conditions, including increases to paid parental and personal leave entitlements, protection of existing conditions and improved staff rostering to reduce workload.

### **Opal Health aged care workers in New South Wales vote for industrial action**

New South Wales Nurses and Midwives Association (NSWNMA) members at 47 Opal Health aged care facilities in New South Wales voted on August 17 to approve taking industrial action in their dispute with Opal over its proposed enterprise agreement.

NSWNMA has over 1,200 members at Opal facilities who are demanding an 18 percent pay increase over three years to keep up with rising inflation and cost of living pressures. They also want Opal to meet their mandatory 200 care minutes per resident obligation, as well as increases in sick leave entitlements. In May, workers voted down Opal's original pay rise offer of 8.25 percent over three years.

Nurses and carers are currently voting on management's latest sub-inflation pay offer of 9.73 percent over three years for registered nurses, and up to 10.2 percent over three years for assistants in nursing.

Industrial action is planned to commence next week. It could include overtime bans and work stoppages, wearing union badges and distributing campaign flyers to residents and their families.

### **Tweed Valley Hospital medical imaging workers demand safe staffing**

Health Services Union (HSU) members at the Tweed Valley Hospital in northeast New South Wales began working to award conditions on August 16 in their fight for safe staffing. Medical imaging department workers are taking award meal breaks, not hastening imaging services to accommodate requests from the emergency department, not accepting increased workloads to cover for absences or increased demand and will close the imaging department if less than two workers are rostered on duty.

HSU claimed unsafe staffing became a major issue when hospital management attempted to implement a 24-hour service without increasing staffing numbers.

### **Qube dock workers in Melbourne take industrial action**

Over 100 Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) members employed by stevedore Qube Ports at the Port of Melbourne have commenced a campaign of industrial action in support of their claims in a new enterprise agreement. On August 9, workers voted unanimously for protected industrial action that could include unlimited stoppages up to 24 hours and 15 different work bans.

Workers imposed bans and limitations on August 16, which includes delaying berthed ships for eight hours, not accepting shifts of less than eight hours, bans on shift extensions and other industrial measures. The MUA claims that Qube has rejected almost 100 percent of the workers' claims.

### **Toowoomba Regional Council workers strike again for pay rise**

The Services Union (TSU) members from Toowoomba Regional Council in southern Queensland walked out for the third time in three weeks and protested outside the city's Town Hall on Tuesday for a better work agreement. The latest strike was sparked when the council refused to meet with workers, cancelled negotiations and failed to set a new meeting date.

TSU has been in negotiations with the council for over four months. It claimed the council paid the lowest rates compared to other regional councils. It wants parity wages, resolution of gender pay-gaps and increased recruitment.

### **Victorian TAFE teachers hold third strike for lower workloads and higher pay**

Following one-hour strikes in June and July, Technical and Further Education (TAFE) teachers at 12 standalone TAFE colleges in Victoria walked out for 24 hours on Wednesday and held a street rally in central Melbourne to demand higher pay and reduced workloads in a new enterprise agreement.

The Australian Education Union (AEU) has allowed negotiations with the state Labor government to drag on for more than two years. It has said further action would include more 24-hour strikes.

Teachers want reduced workloads, class assessment to count as teaching time, education qualifications recognised, classifications fixed, and wage parity with similarly qualified teachers at state-funded schools. The union claims that TAFE teachers are 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.

### **Boroondara City Council child health workers demand higher pay**

Thirty-eight child health nurses and immunisers from Boroondara City Council in Melbourne began low-level industrial action on Monday after

negotiations for a new work agreement reached stalemate. Their action includes wearing red campaign t-shirts and stopping work to have discussions with new parents and members of the community to explain their dispute.

Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation members rejected the council's sub-inflation pay offer of a one-off \$650 cost-of-living payment and a three-year agreement with a 2.75 percent wage increase in the first year and unknown increases in the following years.

Workers want annual 4 percent pay increases and an additional week of annual leave in line with the wider nursing profession and neighbouring councils.

### **Bolton Clark aged care workers continue rolling stoppages**

ANMF members at Bolton Clark aged care facilities in Victoria held two-hour stop work rallies at Templestowe on August 16, followed by stoppages at facilities at Avonlea and Mentone on Friday. The action followed a two-hour statewide stoppage on July 22, on top of work bans put in place on July 15.

The ANMF covers about 1,700 members at Bolton Clark's 22 residential aged care facilities across Victoria, including programs for home nursing, homeless persons and maternal and child health. It has allowed negotiations for a new enterprise agreement to extend over 18 months.

The company's initial zero percent pay rise offer in a one-year agreement was overwhelmingly rejected by workers. Management then increased the offer to a sub-inflation 2 percent for some of the lowest rates in Victoria, along with a new lower pay rate for new employees.

The union wants wages and allowances increased, backdated from June 30, 2024, and in line with the Victorian public health sector, and for this to be the base rate of pay. It also wants a further 4 percent increase on June 30 for each year of the agreement.

### **Victorian Interpreting and Translating Service workers protest wage cut**

Interpreters who rely on employment through the state government's Victorian Interpreting and Translating Service (VITS) LanguageLoop platform announced last week that they would not be accepting work through the service. It was in response to the government's revised payment structure, affecting 3,000 interpreters and calculated to reduce annual incomes between \$8,000 and \$30,000 per annum. Workers said they will not accept work from VITS LanguageLoop until it reinstates its previous rates.

Professionals Australia, which covers these workers, opposed their decision to take action, warning them that it constituted a boycott and in violation of Australian Competition and Consumer Commission legislation.

### **Tasmanian child safety and youth justice workers walk out**

Health and Community Services Union (HACSU) members from Tasmania's Child Safety Services and Youth Justice walked out for an

hour and protested in Launceston on Wednesday, calling on the state Liberal government to increase wages and fix chronic understaffing. The action followed a state-wide one-hour stoppage on August 14. Workers say they have had to struggle with the staff shortage for years.

Government data shows front line worker vacancy rates across the state were a staggering 22 percent in the north, 32.5 percent in the north-west and 13.3 percent in the south. Currently 1,100 at risk child referrals are awaiting call backs. Recent analysis indicates that new child safety investigations are taking about 20 percent longer than a year ago.

The government says it will introduce an emergency workforce plan that includes two \$5,000 payments and a 15 percent market allowance for Child Safety Officers, Allied Health Professionals in the Advice and Referral Line and additional Youth Justice jobs in the state's northwest. The commitment, however, excludes child safety support workers, youth workers, youth justice workers, unit coordinators and other essential frontline workers.

### **Launceston General Hospital laboratory workers strike**

Medical scientists at the Launceston General Hospital from the pathology laboratory walked off the job for 30 minutes on August 14 to demand the Tasmanian government recruit additional workers. HACSU members said staffing shortfalls had significantly reduced their ability to provide vital test results for operating theatres, emergency department and wards.

Workers demanded the state Liberal government immediately recruit additional medical scientists and increase wages to be on par with the private sector. Workers said they will keep taking action until the government resolves the issues.

### **Royal Hobart Hospital imaging workers strike after Tasmanian government stalls on wages**

On Wednesday, Health and Community Services Union (HACSU) members, including radiographers, sonographers and nuclear medicine technologists, from the medical imaging department of the Royal Hobart Hospital walked out for two hours over increasing exploitation, chronic staffing shortfalls and low wages.

Workers claimed the hospital has been unable to fill 30 percent of vacancies in the department and the shortfall is delaying patient's scans. They are demanding wages in line with pathology workers in Australia's mainland states.

After months of negotiations between HACSU and the government, and three months of industrial action, including the banning of the use of a new \$9 million CT scanner at the hospital, negotiations remain deadlocked. The union says it is expecting its members to approve a 24-hour strike if the government fails to meet their demands.

### **Tasmanian power distribution workers strike for pay rise**

More than 300 electrical trades workers at the state-owned power distributor TasNetworks have been on strike since August 14 for higher pay. They want a 30 percent increase to provide pay parity with their

counterparts in Australia's other states.

The Communications, Electrical and Plumbing Union (CEPU) says the workers are being paid on average 30 percent less than other workers doing the same work in other states, and in some cases 50 percent less.

Workers rejected TasNetworks' pay rise offer of 7 percent in the first year and a one-off payment of \$2,000 with years two and three rises linked to the consumer price index (CPI) rate, uncapped.

TasNetworks manages Tasmania's electricity transmission and distribution network and owns and operates a telecommunications network throughout the state.

### **New Zealand ambulance workers strike**

Over 2,500 New Zealand ambulance workers with St John began strike action this week over an employment contract claim. New Zealand Ambulance Association (NZAA) and First Union members walked out for four hours from the start of each shift on Tuesday and Wednesday, then again on Saturday and Sunday.

The NZAA said the latest St John offer was "well short" of what the drivers and medics considered acceptable. The strike action came after St John failed to offer a pay rise, and the government failed to confirm any funding increase to the service.

One St John medic, who has been in the service for 35 years, told the *New Zealand Herald* that the service was in the "worst state" he had ever seen.

St John has been bargaining with the unions since the beginning of this year, after the collective agreement expired last November. A St John spokesman said it had been working with Health NZ and Accident Compensation Corporation to secure additional funding.

### **Fiji: University of the South Pacific staff threaten strike action**

Staff at the University of the South Pacific (USP) in Fiji have voted for strike action to remove the head of the regional education institution, Australian academic Professor Pal Ahluwalia, who is both the university's Vice Chancellor and USP Council president.

The USP has 1,300 staff across 12 Pacific countries. Ilima Finiasi, an executive member of the Association of the USP Staff (AUSPS) at the Laucala campus in Suva, said Ahluwalia had "lost favour" with staff. This week, Fiji campus staff voted in a secret ballot for a strike, triggered by the sacking of Dr Tamara Osborne-Naikatini, the union's president.

The AUSPS claimed Osborne-Naikatini was terminated because she spoke to the media about the vice-chancellor's contract renewal. As a result, Ahluwalia has 'launched a vicious attack on the staff unions and freedom of speech.'

The unions reported that 96 percent of AUSPS members and 94 percent of University of the South Pacific Union members who voted were in favour of striking. This included academic and professional staff as well as administration and support workers. The unions are required to submit a mandatory seven-day strike notice.



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