

Workers Struggles: Asia and Australia

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

India: Outsourced hospital workers in Chandigarh strike over unpaid wages

Around 4,600 outsourced workers from the Postgraduate Institute of Medical Education and Research (PGIMER) Hospital in Chandigarh, Punjab began an indefinite strike on October 12, demanding payment of outstanding wages. Wages are pending from November 2018 until April 2024. Hypocritically, hospital management issued an ultimatum to strikers of “no work no pay.”

The workers are responsible for various jobs in the hospital, including sanitation, shifting of patients, transporting oxygen cylinders, distributing medication and registering patients.

On Wednesday, the Punjab and Haryana high court declared the hospital an essential service and ordered an end to the strike. However, workers declared that they were prepared to go to jail and will not end the strike under current conditions. A spokesperson from the Hospital Attendants’ Union said the strike “Will not be called off without getting our arrears.”

Orissa ASHA workers demand higher wages and permanent jobs

Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA) workers from various places in Orissa state demonstrated outside collector’s offices on October 14 with several long-pending demands. Protests were held in Malkangiri, Jeypore, Korapat and many other places.

Demands were for permanent jobs under the National Health Mission (NHM), a monthly wage of 18,000 rupees (\$US214), pension of 5,000 rupees to retired workers and benefits of about 500,000 rupees during retirement. ASHA workers said they had been called “COVID warriors” but now they “fight for their own stomach.”

Contract workers at government-owned fertiliser factory in Tamil Nadu on strike

About 300 contract workers from the government-owned Madras Fertilizers Limited in Manali, near Chennai, stopped work and demonstrated outside the factory on October 14 demanding wage rises and permanent jobs. The strike was called by the Centre for Indian Trade Unions (CITU). Workers also complained that no compensation was paid to the families of deceased workers and no bonus was provided for Deepavali (Hindu festival) this year.

Pakistan: Welfare workers in Punjab province strike over terminations and unpaid wages

On October 9, dozens of workers from the Population Welfare Department stopped work and demonstrated in Layyah district, Punjab province, protesting the pending termination of their contracts and non-payment of salaries for the last four months. They said their households are in distress and their stoves cold because they are unable to pay electricity bills. They said they do not even have fare money to commute to work. Workers said they would continue their strike unless they get an immediate extension of their contracts.

Thousands of Bangladeshi garment workers remain on strike over unpaid wages and high cost of living

In the continuation of weeks of strikes and protests, tens of thousands of garment workers in Gazipur and Dhaka are refusing to return to work until their demands are met.

On Tuesday, 2,000 factory workers from Taratex Fashion of Tongi stopped work, halting production, demanding payment of their wages from September. One worker said that rising prices had made daily necessities unaffordable, adding, “It now costs 400 taka (\$US3.34) just to buy three vegetables.”

On the same day, striking factory workers from Niagara Textile of Kaliakair, in Gazipur refused to resume work due to unpaid wages. The factory was reopened on Monday after an indefinite shutdown. Workers protested in front of the factory demanding four months of unpaid salaries.

On Monday, around 10,000 garment workers from eight factories in Kachukhet, in Dhaka’s Mirpur Thana, took to the streets to demand three months’ worth of unpaid salaries. They threatened to continue the strike until their dues are cleared. The workers blocked the road between Mirpur-14 and Kachukhet for about an hour.

On October 10, 400 garment workers from Jang Won Corporation Ltd in Gazipur protested to demand a percentage of production bonus, a 50 percent increase to Eid bonuses and a basic salary hike to 14,000 taka. They blocked the Dhaka-Mymensingh highway for one-and-a-half hours.

Industrial action by Ausgrid power distribution workers in New South Wales in third month

About 1,500 Electrical Trades Union (ETU) members from the power utility Ausgrid commenced protected industrial action on August 1 in their fight for an improved pay offer in the company’s proposed enterprise agreement. The union has limited action to ad hoc stoppages and bans on overtime, switching and locking premises and cabinets. On Tuesday,

workers stopped work and rallied at Ausgrid offices in Sydney and Newcastle.

Bargaining for a new agreement started in May. Ausgrid's original pay offer was 7 percent for the first year, followed by 2.7 percent for the second and third years, or the consumer price index if it is higher. Management has made several revised offers which the ETU claimed offered no improvement.

Workers want annual 8 percent pay increases in the three-year agreement. As a result of previous union-brokered agreements, their real wages have declined by 10 percent since 2016.

Brockman Engineering manufacturing workers in Victoria strike for pay rise

About 40 members of the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) and the Construction, Forestry and Maritime Employees Union (CFMEU) walked out for two days from Brockman Engineering's maintenance and construction facility in Geelong, Victoria on October 10, in opposition to the company's sub-inflation pay offer in its proposed enterprise agreement.

The action followed a 12-hour strike and imposition of indefinite bans on overtime and call-ins on October 4, after workers rejected the company's 2.5 percent pay increase offer. The current consumer price index (CPI) for Victoria is 3.7 percent, meaning the pay offer would be a real pay cut.

Royal Hobart Hospital cleaners walk out over outsourcing and chronic understaffing

More than 20 Environmental Services workers at the Royal Hobart Hospital, in Hobart, Tasmania stopped work for one hour on Wednesday and rallied outside the hospital, following a vote of no confidence in management. Workers held placards saying, "Keep it clean, keep it public" and "DOH [department of health] clean up this mess."

Health and Community Services Union (HACSU) members complained about chronic understaffing, a shortage of hospital linen for patients, and the decision to introduce contract cleaners without consultation with the existing workforce.

Staff in most sections of the hospital have been complaining throughout the year about budget cuts, understaffing and low pay. In May and June, medical imaging department workers took industrial action over the staffing vacancy rate reaching 30 percent and to highlight their low wage compared to private sector counterparts.

The HACSU claimed that on April 30, due to understaffing, 51 patients who needed a bed in the RHH were unable to get one, with major surgery being cancelled, and one ambulance not able to offload its patient for three hours. In February, RHH pharmacists overwhelmingly voted to start industrial action due to ongoing workload issues.

Nurses took low-level industrial action in September, with the Australian Nurses and Midwives Federation claiming that statistics showing that, in the RHH Emergency Department, 44 percent of shifts in the past year were worked below the required staffing minimum.

Tasmanian government bus drivers begin industrial action for pay

rise

More than 200 bus drivers from state-owned commuter service Metro Tasmania began protected industrial action on October 10 in their campaign for better pay and conditions. Members of the Rail Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) put in place a "work-to-rule," meaning they are not performing extra duties, along with bans on attending supervisors' meetings and various paperwork. A union spokesperson said the action will continue indefinitely and be escalated if negotiation with the state Liberal government fails to make progress.

Drivers are concerned that low pay has led to a shortage of drivers, resulting in the permanent cancellation of dozens of bus routes in August last year. The government issued a temporary 10 percent pay rise outside the enterprise agreement in September last year. While this stemmed the exodus of workers, it did not boost the workforce.

Workers are demanding that last year's temporary pay increase be locked into the new agreement and increased, along with improved safety.

Fire Rescue Victoria administration staff begin industrial action for pay rise

Administrative and clerical workers from Fire Rescue Victoria (FRV) began industrial action on October 10, demanding a pay increase in a new enterprise agreement. The 240 workers, who are members of the United Firefighters Union Victoria (UFUV), have not had a pay increase for four years. The union claimed that, since 2019, wages have effectively declined by 20 percent.

More than 97 percent of workers voted on October 8 to approve industrial action that could include work stoppages up to 2 hours along with more than 20 administrative bans. The UFUV is limiting the industrial action workers can take, under the pretext that their job is "critical." Actions will include writing all emails in capital letters, not turning cameras on during Zoom meetings and holding stop-work protests of up to two hours, during which they will display union material on FRV property.

Meanwhile, front-line firefighters from several Melbourne fire stations rallied outside state parliament on October 10 to protest the dangerous and poor condition of their old fleet of firetrucks and equipment, which they say is unreliable and not fit for purpose. They claimed that there are no reserve pumper tankers available as breakdowns and faults continue to plague critical firefighting equipment.

Victorian TAFE teachers hold fourth strike for pay increase and lower workload

In a long-running pay dispute being dragged out by the Australian Education Union (AEU), Technical and Further Education (TAFE) teachers from 12 standalone TAFE colleges in Victoria held their fourth 24-hour strike since June on Thursday and rallied outside their colleges or in front of the offices of state Labor members of parliament. The AEU has allowed negotiations with the state Labor government to drag on for more than two years.

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 school teachers. They also want an end to chronic understaffing, unpaid and excessive overtime and high teacher turnover.

Grill'd restaurant workers in Melbourne strike over exploitation

Twelve United Workers Union (AWU) members employed at a Grill'd restaurant in central Melbourne are taking strike action Saturday to oppose management's underpayment of wages. The union claims that Grill'd has relied on exploitative "traineeships" and systematic underpayments, with some workers being paid just \$14.50 an hour for years.

Workers accused Grill'd of trying to formalise these conditions in a new enterprise agreement it put to them for a vote. Workers voted unanimously to strike after rejecting the company's proposed agreement.

Eighteen-year-old trainees are earning as little as \$17.00 an hour on weekend penalties, an hourly wage well below the national minimum wage of \$24.10 an hour. Industrial action is expected to continue if Grill'd management fails to meet workers' demands for a living wage.

Grill'd is a privately owned multimillion-dollar burger chain with operations across Australia. In 2019 the company was accused of using government-subsidised traineeships to keep its young workers on low wages.

GrainCorp workers in New South Wales vote on industrial action

About 200 Australian Workers Union (AWU) members at GrainCorp's grain storage and processing depots in New South Wales are voting in a ballot to decide on taking protected industrial action in their dispute with the company over its proposed enterprise agreement. If approved, action could include a ban on the unloading and loading of grain trucks lasting from 30 minutes to hours or days. The ballot closes on October 23.

An AWU spokesperson admitted that the last enterprise agreement it negotiated for GrainCorp members had seen their wages go backwards in real terms. It contained annual wage rises of just 2 percent per annum over three years. In the same three-year period inflation had risen each year by 2.86 percent, 6.59 percent and 4.1 percent, or 13.55 percent in total, meaning workers took a 7.55 percent cut in real terms.

The AWU is seeking wage parity with GrainCorp's Queensland employees.

GrainCorp's profits have soared amid bumper crops and increased profit opportunities resulting from the war in Ukraine, as well as the real wage cuts. The company's financial year 2023 report claimed an after-tax net profit of \$250 million. It paid shareholders a dividend of 30 cents per share and committed to a buyback of \$50 million of its shares.



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