

# 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: Female gig workers hold national strike to protest exploitation

Female gig workers operating through platform companies like Uber, Ola, Zomato and Swiggy, conducted a digital strike nationwide on Thursday (Deepavali Hindu festival day). The low paid workers switched off their phones for the whole day.

The Gig and Platform Service Workers Union (GIPSWU) co-ordinated the strike, saying it needed to bring to the attention of the government and public the harassment and humiliation the women gig workers are undergoing while carrying out their job. Workers are demanding to be classified as employees, not as business partners, which denies them workers' rights and allows super-exploitation.

## Salem Steel Plant workers strike over long outstanding demands

About 600 workers from three units of the Salem Steel Plant (subsidiary of the Steel Authority of India Limited) in Tamil Nadu struck on Monday over several demands, including more outstanding payments of over three years of pending wages and house rent allowance for the past decade. They also demanded a salary increase, continuation of the current grant-in-aid programme, updates to the incentive pay scheme, which has not been revised since 2007, cancellation of mandates affecting work stoppages and a review of the bonus structure.

Their unions, affiliated with India National Trade Union Congress and Centre for Indian Trade Unions, decided to strike after a meeting with the chief labour commissioner on October 25 in Delhi failed to resolve their grievances.

## Tamil Nadu Tea Plantation Corporation workers strike for bonus increase

About 3,000 Tamil Nadu Tea Plantation Corporation (TANTEA) workers stopped work and protested outside the TANTEA office headquarters in Ooty on Monday to demand a raise in the yearly bonus for Deepavali. While the workers from Valparai and Nilgiris estates demanded a 20 percent bonus, the government has mandated only 10 percent.

## West Bengal tea plantation workers in Darjeeling hold protest relay hunger strike

Tea plantation workers in the foothills of Darjeeling, West Bengal began a relay hunger strike protest on October 16 with over several grievances and a demand that this year's bonus be 20 percent.

Workers said they had not been paid proper wages and Provident Fund. They alleged that 162 million rupees (\$US1.93 million) of Provident Fund had not been paid since 2013 and wage arrears of 20 million rupees were pending. A tripartite meeting between the trade union, labour commissioner and management is scheduled for November 6.

## Powercom office workers and pensioners in Tarn Taran protest

Workers and pensioners from the Punjab State Power Corporation (Powercom) protested outside the company's office in Tarn Taran on Monday over various issues, such as removal of discrepancies in the Sixth Pay Commission recommendations and the linking of Dearness Allowance to Central government rates. Workers burnt effigies of the Aam Aadmi Party-led state government for not fulfilling promises it made during the elections.

## Bangladeshi garment workers continue protests over unpaid wages

About 700 garment factory workers from TNZ Group in Gazipur on Tuesday took strike action to demand outstanding salaries for September. They occupied the factory confining the director and administration inside the factory.

Management at five TNZ factories—TNZ Apparels Limited, Basic Clothing Limited, Apparels Plus Eco, Basic Knitwear Ltd, and Apparels Eight Limited—failed to pay wages on October 23.

Workers from four factories under Apex Limited in Gazipur walked out on Sunday to demand attendance fees, night payments and other demands. The company consists of Apex Lingerie Limited, Apex Spinning and Knitting Mills Limited, Apex Textile Printing Mills Limited, and Apex Yarn Dyeing Limited.

Factory owners had responded to growing protests the day before by shutting down operations at 4 p.m. Workers were confronted with notices saying the factories would remain closed when they arrived the following day.

## **Sri Lankan railway station masters hold 24-hour strike**

Regular services of the Sri Lanka Railways were affected on Wednesday after Sri Lanka Railways Station Masters' Union members struck over several issues. These included the recruitment of station masters in violation of traditional procedures, promotions not being granted and irregularities impacting on railway operations.

Station masters refused to issue tickets and allowed passengers to travel free. They also refused to handle seat reservations and transport parcels.

A union spokesman said authorities had been urged to update the train timetable because train services were coming to a standstill each day because of increased workloads including the issuing of season tickets for schoolchildren and employees and frequent derailments.

## **Qube workers at Brisbane and Darwin ports continue industrial action**

Following seven days of industrial action at five major Australian ports on October 11, Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) members at Qube's Brisbane and Darwin terminals began seven days of industrial action on October 25 for higher pay. The protected industrial action by 380 MUA members at Qube ports began on September 13.

Workers have banned night shifts, shift extensions, work on ships for the first 8 hours in port, shifts longer than 8 hours, start times for all shifts apart from 7 a.m., 3 p.m. and 11 p.m. Workers are also holding one-hour daily work stoppages at 5:30 a.m., 1:30 p.m. and 9:30 p.m.

Qube has been trying to renegotiate 19 enterprise agreements around Australia with its stevedoring workers since October last year.

MUA members have rejected Qube's pay rise offer of 5 percent over each of the first two years of a new agreement, and 4 percent in each of the two subsequent years, as well as back pay for agreements concluded by September 30. The MUA says its members' wages have declined by 14 percent in real terms while Qube profits have risen by 148 percent over the duration of the last enterprise agreement.

## **GrainCorp workers in New South Wales strike for pay increase**

About 150 Australian Workers Union (AWU) members at GrainCorp's grain storage and processing depots in New South Wales began rolling one-hour stoppages on October 29 to push for an improved pay. The union warned GrainCorp that stoppages will be back-to-back and for up to four hours, depending on the workload at each depot, and will continue for 30 days.

Real wages have declined since the last union-negotiated enterprise agreement in 2021. 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.

GrainCorp's latest pay offer was for a 14 percent increase over three years with a sign on bonus. Workers want wage parity with GrainCorp's Queensland employees. They also want the offer increased by 1 percent a year and the sign on bonus increased and back pay to July 1, which they say will bring them close to parity with their colleagues in Queensland.

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.

## **Centennial Coal mine workers in New South Wales strike for pay rise**

Over 300 workers at Centennial Coal's mine at Mandalong in the Hunter Valley walked off the job for 48 hours on Thursday. Mining and Energy Union (MEU) members are in dispute with Centennial Coal over its proposed enterprise agreement. It was their second strike this month over the issue.

The MEU has responded to a management threat to lock out striking workers by announcing a 72-hour strike starting on November 4 and a 48-hour strike commencing November 10.

MEU is demanding annual pay increases in a four-year agreement of 4 percent in 2024, followed by 6 percent, 5 percent and 4 percent in 2027.

## **Komatsu Mining equipment assembly and maintenance workers in New South Wales strike for improved pay offer**

About 100 workers from the Komatsu Mining heavy equipment assembly plant at Moss Vale in NSW's Southern Highlands began industrial action on October 23 in their dispute for an improved pay offer in the company's proposed enterprise agreement.

After rejecting the company's "substandard" wages and conditions offer in September, members of the Electrical Trades Union and Australian Manufacturing Workers Union voted on October 10 to approve industrial action that could include indefinite stoppages from one hour up to and greater than one week, and a ban on overtime and inspections. Their last pay increase was October 1, 2023.

## **North West Private Hospital nurses in Tasmania strike for improved pay offer**

Over 40 Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation (ANMF) members from the North West Private Hospital, in Burnie, Tasmania walked off the job for over an hour on Tuesday and rallied outside the hospital holding signs saying "Does Healthe Care care?" and "Safer Staffing Safer Care." Nurses are in dispute with the owner of the hospital Healthe Care over its proposed enterprise agreement.

ANMF members overwhelmingly voted to approve industrial action on September 18 after rejecting Healthe Care's pay rise offer of 3.5 percent in the first year, 3.25 percent in the second year, and 3 percent in the third year. The offer is a real pay cut compared to the current consumer price index (CPI) rate of 3.8 percent. Nurses stopped work for 30 minutes on October 16 after rejecting the latest offer of annual increases of 4, 3.75 and 3 percent.

The nurses' last pay increase was only 2.5 percent on July 1, 2023. The CPI at the time was 5.4 percent, putting nurses well behind the rising cost of living. The ANMF wants a minimum pay rise of 5 percent per year in the three-year agreement and issues around inadequate staffing levels resolved.

## **Metro Tasmania bus drivers and mechanics strike for pay rise**

Bus drivers at the government-owned Metro Tasmania in Launceston walked off the job for an hour at 1 p.m. on October 24 in their dispute with the state Liberal government's pay offer in its proposed enterprise agreement. Rail Tram and Bus Union members have also expanded their "work-to-rule" ban that was put in place in early October. Bans now will include not using mobile phones while on shift, not doing reversing manoeuvres unless under supervision, not swapping buses unless on standby, not driving buses with defects and not operating a bus with its closed-circuit security television not fully operational.

Drivers are concerned that low pay has led to a shortage of drivers, resulting in the permanent cancellation of dozens of bus routes across Tasmania 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 want last year's temporary pay increase locked into the new agreement and increased, along with improved safety.

Meanwhile, Metro Tasmania maintenance mechanics, who are members of the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU), walked off the job for an hour on October 24 in their dispute for a new enterprise agreement. The action was part of a long running dispute that began with a month-long strike in October last year over wages, which they say are \$10 an hour below the industry standard. They again stopped work for 24 hours in March over the issue.

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

## **Churches of Christ aged care nurses in Victoria strike again for pay rise**

Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation members at Churches of Christ facilities—Arcadia Aged Care and Oak Towers Aged Care—stopped work in the afternoon on Monday and Tuesday, respectively, and rallied outside their premises to protest the company's proposed enterprise agreement. Industrial action began on October 24 when they stopped work and placed bans on paperwork, computer operations and other administrative duties, which they are maintaining.

Management responded to the first round of action by offering an administrative wage rise of 1.5 percent if the ANMF suspended industrial action without any new agreement being reached. Nurses rejected this, saying that they urgently needed a new agreement that will protect their current conditions when a prospective new buyer takes over the facilities. Their previous enterprise agreement expired in 2020. They have not had a pay rise since July 2019.

Wages for nursing staff at the facilities are well below the Victorian industry standard. A registered nurse grade 2 year 3 is paid \$100 less per week, an enrolled nurse at pay point 8 \$57 less and a Cert III personal care worker is earning about \$55 less each week.

The ANMF wants at least a four percent per annum increase over a four-year agreement, a workload management clause, replacement of all absences, adequate shift handover time, increased parental leave, earlier access to long service leave, access to a sixth week of annual leave for part-time registered nurses who work shift work and improved penalties and allowances.

## **South Australia state parliament staff strike for higher wages**

Staff at South Australia's Parliament House in Adelaide walked out on October 23. They were protesting slow progress in negotiations with the state Labor government for a new enterprise agreement.

The dispute involves about 80 parliamentary services workers in Hansard (recording), catering, building and library services who are being represented in negotiations by the Australian Employment Alliance and the Public Service Association.

Last month PSA members rejected the government's sub-inflation wage rise offer of just 11 percent over three years. The offer was well below the current consumer price index for Adelaide of 4.7 percent, meaning a 14.1 percent increase is needed just to keep pace with inflation.

PSA negotiators had been demanding a 21 percent wage rise over the same period—10 percent rise in the first year, followed by 6 percent, then 5 percent. Workers claimed they are ranked as Australia's lowest-paid parliamentary workers. The PSA says further industrial action is to be expected.

## **University of the South Pacific staff prepare to resume strike**

University of the South Pacific (USP) staff at the Laucala campus in Suva, Fiji who walked out last week are preparing to strike again. A spokesperson for the Association of the University of the South Pacific Staff (AUSPS), said that strike action could resume next week during students' final exams.

The unions started striking on 18 October and suspended it on 24th. They are calling for vice-chancellor Pal Ahluwalia to resign and for AUSPS president Osborne-Naikatini, who was sacked in July for allegedly revealing confidential details of Ahluwalia's employment contract, to be reinstated.

Ahluwalia has himself been suspended by the council over unspecified charges. The Fiji government is putting pressure on USP to follow through with an independent review agreed on at a council meeting last month. While the USP said the review should be on "human resources," the unions want it to focus on the grievances staff have with the vice-chancellor.

The AUSPS says it has been over five weeks since the special council meeting, but no progress had been made with the investigation. "We have not withdrawn the strike; the unions informed council last week that we will take intermittent striking when we see that there's no movement. If no progress is made, we reserve the right to strike again," the spokesperson said.



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