

# 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: ASHA workers' strike in Kerala enters eighth week

The strike by 26,000 ASHA (Accredited Social Health Activists) workers begun on February 10 over poverty wages and poor conditions is being maintained along with their protest outside the Thiruvananthapuram Secretariat. The ASHA strikers responded to government threats that they would be sacked by beginning a relay-hunger strike protest on March 8 and then cutting off their hair to show their determination to fight for their demands.

ASHA workers are a critical part of the public health system in rural areas and suffer poverty wages and harsh working conditions. Their work includes the vaccination of children from marginal and poor families, care for patients in outpatient wings, assisting pregnant women, recording births and deaths and many health awareness programs.

Workers want their monthly wage increased from a meagre 7,000 rupees (\$US80) to about 21,000 rupees, a 5,000-rupee pension, and withdrawal of the compulsory retirement age of 62. Workers complained that they only receive 4,000 to 5,000 rupees of the current monthly pay.

The Kerala government, which falsely claimed that ASHA workers in Kerala are highly paid compared to their co-workers in other states, has cynically promised to increase their honorarium if the central government "chips in."

## Kerala Anganwadi workers' union shuts down indefinite strike

On Tuesday, the Indian National Anganwadi Employees Federation, which is affiliated to the Congress Party's Indian Trade Union Congress, called off the indefinite strike by Anganwadi (rural childcare centre) workers begun on March 17 without revealing the outcome of talks with the state government. The federation told the media it had been "given assurances" from the finance minister and health minister.

The workers were protesting alongside striking ASHA workers outside the Thiruvananthapuram Secretariat. The federation leadership kept the disputes separate and has not voiced any kind of solidarity with ASHA workers.

Anganwadi workers were demanding higher pay, a 5,000-rupee festival benefit, quality food for children, a decent smart phone for communications, wages in single payments, Employee State Insurance and expansion of the welfare board's operations.

## Nestlé factory workers in Goa begin hunger strike protest

Contract workers from the Nestlé factory in Bicholim, Goa state, began an indefinite hunger strike protest on March 31. They are demanding immediate employment for about thirty contract workers retrenched in 2013. The workers are organised by the Rashtriya Mulnivasi Bahujan Karmachari Sangh.

A union spokesperson said the workers were retrenched illegally on false charges that were later cleared. He said the union submitted a charter of 25 demands to Nestlé, but the company is delaying and adopting hire-and-fire tactics.

## Diamond workers strike indefinitely in Surat

Diamond workers in Surat, Gujarat state, began an indefinite strike on March 31 to oppose a 50 percent wage cut and job losses. Surat is a hub to one million diamond workers who process about 90 percent of world's rough diamonds in about 2,500 units. The workers are facing reduced demand in the sector due to the world economic crisis.

## Bangladesh: TNZ Group garment workers protest for unpaid wages in Gazipur

Workers from three TNZ Group garment factories in Gazipur have been involved in a sit-in protest outside the Divisional Labour Office in Dhaka since March 23. They are demanding three months of unpaid wages and their Eid bonus.

Workers rejected the company's proposal to pay only 30 million takas (\$US0.24m) of the unpaid wages, well below the total 170 million takas owed to the workers.

There are over 3,000 workers employed at three garment manufacturing facilities, TNZ Apparels, Apparel Plus Eco, and Apparel Art. The workers accused management of breaching trilateral contracts, which were established to resolve salary and benefit disputes among factory owners, workers and government authorities.

One worker denounced the government saying: "On the one hand, the government is saying the workers' protests are 'incitement', and on the other hand, it is ignoring the peaceful movement day after day." The workers said they are determined to continue their protest until their demands are granted.

## **Castlemaine Perkins brewery workers strike for pay rise and protection of existing conditions**

About 100 production and maintenance workers from the Castlemaine Perkins brewery in Brisbane, which produces XXXX beer, walked off the job for 24 hours on Tuesday in a dispute over the company's proposed enterprise agreement. The United Workers Union and the Electrical Trades Union claimed Castlemaine Perkins, a division of the Japanese-owned company Lion, is attempting to strip away crucial entitlements.

The unions have been in negotiations with the company since December, demanding a 15 percent pay rise over three years and retention of conditions for workers and apprentices. The company wants to include apprentices in the new agreement but not carry over existing entitlements, such as laundry allowance, side allowances and Christmas bonuses.

Workers are also concerned that the company wants to impose new conditions when they access personal leave for significant health issues.

## **Kellogg's factory workers in Sydney threatened with lockout**

About 140 United Workers Union members at the Kellogg's factory in Sydney have been threatened with an indefinite lockout starting on April 5 if they take industrial action during their pay dispute with the company. The workers voted on March 13 to approve taking protected industrial action that could include bans on overtime, using forklifts and unlimited work stoppages ranging from 1 hour to 48 hours.

The workers want improved conditions and a pay rise that keeps pace with inflation in a new enterprise agreement.

## **Noosa council workers hold third strike for higher pay**

Workers at the Noosa Shire Council in southeast Queensland walked off the job for three hours at 10.30 a.m. on Thursday in their third strike in as many weeks to demand an improved pay offer in the council's proposed enterprise agreement. The council's 150 workers rejected its proposed pay offer of annual increases of 6.5 percent, 3.5 percent in the last two years in a three-year agreement.

The Services Union (TSU) and Australian Workers Union (AWU) began negotiations in October wanting increases of 9.5 percent from February 2025 and 4.5 percent or consumer price index (CPI), whichever is greater, in each of the last two years of the agreement. The TSU claimed that some members are paid \$4,000 a year less than at neighbouring councils.

On Tuesday, TSU members placed work bans on emails, phone calls and meetings. Noosa Shire Council is not budging on its offer and made submissions to the Industrial Relations Commission to have the dispute mediated in the commission.

## **Strathcona Girls Grammar school teachers to strike for pay rise and reduced workload**

About 100 teachers and teaching assistants from the elite private school Strathcona Girls Grammar in Hawthorn, Melbourne will begin industrial

action on April 8 in response to stalled negotiations over working hours and pay. Independent Education Union-Victoria (IEU) members voted near unanimously to approve taking industrial action.

Despite six months of negotiations for a new enterprise agreement there are several unresolved issues, including enforceable limits to scheduled teaching time, protection of time for preparation and marking, salary increase and the right to access arbitration in the case of a workplace dispute. An IEU spokesperson said the workload limit is a critical issue and the pay offer does not keep pace with the increasing cost of living.

Starting next Tuesday, IEU members will wear union T-shirts at work and put industrial campaign messages on their emails and not attend assemblies. They have threatened to escalate industrial action if needed from term two.

## **Newcastle bus drivers take action for pay rise**

Keolis Downer bus drivers in Newcastle and Lake Macquarie, in New South Wales, have turned off their Opal card readers (fare collecting machines) indefinitely to force the company to resume negotiations for a new enterprise agreement. Commuters will have free travel.

A spokesman from the Rail Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) claimed Keolis Downer had repeatedly delayed negotiations by rostering local union delegates on shift leaving them unable to attend meetings. He said two key demands were a pay increase and at least 72 hours' notice for changes to driver's shifts.

## **Victoria's Forest Fire Management workers escalate industrial action**

Work bans imposed by 630 Forest Fire Management Victoria (FFMV) workers in January have been extended this week to include not operating vehicles, doing maintenance, baiting, trapping and some record keeping.

Australian Workers Union (AWU) members are demanding higher wages and improved working conditions in a new Field Staff and Wild Dog Controller Enterprise Agreement.

Negotiations have been ongoing since June 2024, just before the old agreement expired. The FFMV and the state Labor government are refusing to move beyond its annual wages' policy cap of 3 percent. The AWU says its members are among the lowest paid Victorian government workers and cannot live on their current wages.

In March AWU, members voted overwhelmingly to approve wide ranging bans and strike action including unlimited stoppages of all work.

## **Workers at Victoria's public mental health facilities continue industrial campaign**

Nurses and non-medical staff at 19 Victorian public mental health facilities are continuing industrial action, including strikes, which began on February 18, during their enterprise agreement dispute with the state Labor government. On Wednesday, about 1,000 Health and Community Services Union (HACSU) members stopped work statewide and held a protest march in Melbourne and a rally outside the Victorian parliament.

Mental health workers want pay parity with their colleagues in Victoria's public general hospitals, mandated staffing ratios and allied

health worker profiles. HACSU, representing occupational therapists, social workers, health professionals, lived-experience workers and administrative staff, claims that some mental health workers are being paid up to \$30,000 less per annum than public hospital colleagues doing the same work.

The Labor government's proposed enterprise agreement was rejected by 90 percent of workers saying the 3 percent per annum pay increase was well below what is needed for pay parity and it failed to address the issues of ratios and staffing profiles.

### **New Zealand hospitality workers protest over minimum wage**

Hospitality workers across New Zealand rallied on April 1 after the minimum wage was raised by only 35 cents per hour, less than the rate of inflation. The new rate of \$23.50 per hour, set by the far-right National Party-led government, is an increase of just 1.5 percent and will impact on between 80,000 and 145,000 workers. Inflation currently sits at 2.2 percent. This is the smallest minimum wage increase since 2013 when it rose by 25 cents.

Unite Union hosted five events, in Auckland, Wellington, Christchurch, Dunedin and Palmerston North. The union absurdly called on the government and employers to take "real action on poverty" by increasing wages. Unite assistant national secretary Ben Peterson said hospitality workers needed a government that was "capable of protecting the wellbeing of all working people." Such appeals to the ruling elite are a complete fraud.

Unite has declared it will be seeking "meaningful pathways to living wages" in its 2025 wage negotiations with KFC, McDonald's, Burger King and other hospitality employers. The so-called "Living Wage," \$4.30 per hour more than the legal minimum, is falsely promoted by the unions as what is necessary to live on with "dignity." In fact, it remains woefully inadequate under the escalating cost-of-living crisis.



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