

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

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## South Korea: Seoul bus drivers apply work bans in pay dispute

Seoul city bus drivers began work-to-rule industrial action on Wednesday following a breakdown in negotiations with the Seoul Metropolitan Government for a new collective agreement. The action, which involves drivers strictly adhering to traffic laws, not departing until all passengers are seated and refraining from overtaking other buses, followed a 24-hour work-to-rule on April 30.

The main issue in dispute is whether bonuses should be included in base wages. The bus drivers' union argues that a Supreme Court ruling last December requires that bi-monthly bonuses, equivalent to 100 percent of base salary, be counted as part of the regular wage.

Other union demands include an 8.2 percent increase in base pay, the elimination of wage disparities for equal work, and extending the retirement age from 63 to 65.

Management insists that the current wage system excludes bonuses from base wages and therefore the union's demands are unrealistic. It wants the wage structure to be reformed in light of the court ruling.

## Striking teachers in Nepal win better pay and conditions

Thousands of teachers in Nepal ended five weeks of protests and a nation-wide strike on Tuesday after the government agreed to a nine-point agreement that included significant salary increases and long-pending benefits.

Nepal Teachers Federation (NTF) members began an indefinite strike on April 7 across the nation demanding implementation of the School Education Act., which provides improved pay and conditions. Police brutally attacked their ongoing sit-in protest in Maitighar-Naya Baneshwor, Kathmandu on April 27, injuring 60 protesters and hospitalising 27 with serious head wounds.

Teachers were protesting the government's failure to endorse the school education bill, which has been in a parliamentary committee for over 18 months. The government reluctantly entered into talks with the NTF after the Supreme Court issued an order directing it to immediately address the demands of the striking teachers and for teachers to return to school within three days.

As well as salary increases, additional wins included grade progression in the education sector aligned with civil service standards, access to public hospitals, medical leave reimbursement, and rural allowances.

Unlawful transfers and salary threats against protesting teachers were revoked.

## India: Telangana bus drivers walk out for wage rise

Telangana State Road Transport Corporation workers stopped work on Wednesday, putting 6,000 buses off the road. The TGSRTC Joint Action Committee (JAC) and other unions called the strike after talks with the government that followed a rally on Tuesday failed to reach agreement.

The JAC claimed that over 40,600 workers were expected to strike. Workers want a wage rise, reduction of working hours from the current 16 hours and other demands.

## India's trade unions call for national strike

The All-India Trade Union Congress, Indian National Trade Union Congress, Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) and Hind Mazdoor Sabha have called for a national strike on May 20 to oppose the "anti-worker" and "anti-people" policies of the Union government. Unions say new labour codes would reduce workers into slavery.

CITU claimed that the government was trying to privatise public sector enterprises like Visakhapatnam Steel Plant, LIC, railways, defence and mines, and hand them over to corporate groups. Unions are demanding that the government fix the minimum wage at 26,000 rupees (\$US305) a month, the minimum pension be fixed at 10,000 rupees and the services of contract workers and scheme workers be regularised.

CITU accused the government of trying to increase working hours from the present 8 hours to 14 hours and demanded an end to the privatisation of power utilities and power tariff increases be withdrawn.

## Samsung India household appliance factory workers in Tamil Nadu protest

The newly-formed Samsung India Workers' Union (SIWU), affiliated to the Centre for India Trade Unions, has planned a series of demonstrations commencing on May 13 to protest management's "illegal" practices. Several days of action will include a one-day hunger strike on May 13 and a series of rallies and protests through to May 19. Workers will submit a petition to the South Korean Embassy and a formal complaint to the National Human Rights Commission.

The SIWU is demanding revocation of the suspension and other disciplinary action against 23 employees. They also want the company to stop trying to force workers to sign the “illegal” agreement it established with the company-initiated minority union.

On March 7, CITU abruptly shut down a militant month-long sit-in strike by 500 permanent workers begun on February 5 over the suspension of SIWU officials. Even though formal registration of the union was endorsed by the Labour Ministry, management tried to coerce workers to join a management-formed workers committee.

Interest-free loans of 300,000 rupees (\$US3,455) were offered to workers as a bribe if they joined the company’s committee. The demonstrations are a desperate appeal to the Tamil Nadu government to intervene in the dispute.

### **Bangladeshi assistant teachers demand pay rise and promotions**

Assistant teachers from Bangladesh government primary schools began nationwide daily one-hour work abstention on Monday to demand a pay rise and promotions.

The Primary Assistant Teachers Association Unity Council said their protest would continue till May 15, and if the authorities failed to respond, they would resume their protest on May 16 with longer hours of work abstention increasing in steps.

They want assistant teacher positions established as an entry level position to all government primary schools, upgrading assistant teachers’ salary to the 11th grade, and the removal of existing barriers to achieving a higher grade for teachers who are 10 years and 16 years into the job.

The assistant teachers also want all head teachers to be appointed from the pool of assistant teachers through promotion and provisions for quicker promotions. Currently, 35 percent of primary school head teachers are appointed through the Bangladesh Public Service Commission, while only 65 percent of positions are filled by promoting assistant teachers.

According to the Annual Primary School Census 2023, the number of government primary schools is 65,567, and the number of assistant teachers in these schools is 319,625.

### **Bangladeshi tea garden workers protest for unpaid entitlements**

About 2,600 tea garden workers and their family members from three tea gardens in Sylhet blocked the Sylhet Airport Road around noon on Sunday to demand wage arrears and allowances. The blockade created major traffic congestion. Protesters from the Burjan, Kalagul and Chharangang tea gardens, under the Burjan Tea Company, gathered in the Malnichara area on Sunday morning.

The workers’ 11 demands include recognition of the tea garden workers’ ownership on the land they have been living on for generations and calls for tea gardens to be brought under government management following cancellation of an agreement with the private-run company.

Workers said they faced serious hardships since their wages and food allowances remained suspended for more than 20 weeks. “We can’t afford to provide our children with meals regularly,” a Kalagul Tea Garden worker said.

Another female worker said they had protested for regular payments of their weekly wages for more than three months, adding: “Despite making repeated promises of meeting our demands, the tea garden owners did not pay us our wages of a single week forcing us to take to the streets.”

The police forced workers to withdraw their blockade, while local administration assured them of meeting their demands after a discussion with union officials from the Bangladesh Tea Worker Union.

### **Keolis Downer bus mechanics in Sydney strike again for higher pay**

Heavy-vehicle maintenance mechanics employed by commuter transport contractor Keolis Downer at the Brookvale and Mona Vale bus depots in Sydney’s northern beaches walked off the job for 48 hours on May 2 for their second strike in as many weeks. The 50 Australian Manufacturing Workers Union members are demanding a substantial pay rise and improved conditions in the company’s proposed enterprise agreement.

The union accused Keolis Downer of failing to negotiate proper pay and conditions. It alleged that members’ pay has not kept pace with industry rates, saying Keolis Downer is paying \$41 an hour while other companies in the industry are offering \$48 an hour. Workers want pay parity with other mechanics doing the same job.

### **Western Australian firefighters in pay dispute**

Firefighters from Western Australia’s Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions are taking industrial action in their fight for better wages and conditions. The workers deal with the management of state-owned and operated forests and land across the state, which includes bushfire responses.

The work-to-rule action by 300 members of the Australian Workers Union (AWU) involves not working overtime, which will have a major effect on planned burn offs. An AWU spokesman said the union had been negotiating a pay increase and improved conditions with the state Labor government for more than two years, while its members were paid between 15 to 20 percent lower than other government sector workers.

### **Victorian public hospital mental health workers continue rolling stoppages**

As part of ongoing industrial action by over 1,800 nurses and non-medical staff at 19 public mental health facilities across Victoria, 20 workers, including nurses, social workers, occupational therapists, lived experience staff and administration staff, stopped work for two hours and protested in front of the Goulburn Valley Health’s Wanyarra Acute Inpatient Unit on April 29.

The Health and Community Services Union (HACSU) members began a series of rolling stoppages at individual facilities on February 18 in their enterprise agreement dispute with the state Labor government. While negotiations have been ongoing for over eight months the union’s limited action has resolved nothing for mental health nurses.

Workers want pay parity with their colleagues in the state’s public hospitals, mandated staffing ratios and allied health worker profiles. HACSU 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 pay parity and failed to address ratios and staffing profiles.

#### **Forensicare mental health workers in Victoria strike**

Health and Community Services Union (HACSU) members at the state-run Victorian Institute of Forensic Mental Health (Forensicare) hospital in Fairfield, a suburb of Melbourne, stopped work for two hours on Wednesday and rallied near the Clifton Hill facility. About 350 HACSU members are employed at Forensicare and are demanding better pay and conditions in a new enterprise agreement.

#### **Pepsico snack food factory workers in Adelaide walk out for pay rise**

More than 150 United Workers Union (UWU) members from the Pepsico snack food factory at Regency Park in Adelaide, South Australia, walked off the job for 4 hours on Thursday afternoon in opposition to the company's pay offer in its proposed enterprise agreement.

Under the current union negotiated agreement that expired in February, workers received wage increases of 2.6 percent over three years totalling 7.8 percent while inflation in Adelaide rose by almost 16 per cent. A UWU spokesperson claimed that the rise equated to a real wage cut of 8 percent.

Workers rejected PepsiCo's 12 percent raise over the next three years demanding a 15 percent raise over the next three years to catch up with inflation. They claim to be worse off than their PepsiCo counterparts in Queensland who are paid 12 percent more for the same work on identical products which are sold at identical prices.

#### **St John ambulance paramedics in Western Australia protest low pay offer**

About 1,100 St John Ambulance paramedics began limited industrial action on April 29 in opposition to St John's proposed enterprise agreement. Action includes chalking slogans on emergency vehicles saying, "response times..flat lined", "overworked and underpaid" and "ambos = saving lives, WA Health = saving \$".

The Ambulance Employees Association of WA said the offer failed to address paramedics' low wages or the excessive amount of overtime they were forced to work. Workers say they are being underpaid compared to paramedics in other states and face exhausting obligatory overtime. The union said members are also concerned about rising ramping, response times, and worsening working conditions.

A report by the union claimed the state Labor government has fostered a secretive culture where the ambulance ramping crisis is hidden from public view at all costs, health partners are subject to gag orders, and critical government contracts, such as the Ambulance Service Agreement, are treated as 'commercial-in-confidence', thereby escaping all scrutiny.

#### **Riverina water utility workers in New South Wales strike for shorter hours**

About 30 Riverina Water County Council (RWCC) outdoor workers walked off the job for the day on Wednesday and rallied outside their depot in Wagga Wagga, New South Wales, to protest their employer's proposed enterprise agreement.

Their current work agreement expires in June and the United Services Union (USU) has been in negotiations with RWCC for over six months. Workers are demanding their current 38-hour week be brought into line with the utility's indoor staff's 35-hour week. According to the USU, a difference in work hours and wages means outdoor workers are doing a month of unpaid work per year and are being paid a little under 8 percent per hour less than their indoor colleagues.

RWCC's operations include the supply and maintenance of lines and equipment guaranteeing drinking water to more than 77,000 people across 15,000 square kilometres of southern New South Wales.



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