

# 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: Striking ASHA workers in Kerala attacked by police

Striking Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA) workers in Kerala, who have been involved in a sit-down protest outside the secretariat at Thiruvananthapuram since February, were violently attacked by police as they marched toward the chief minister's office on October 23. The 26,000 striking workers, who are organised by the Kerala ASHA Health Workers Association, are demanding higher salaries, official work status, and government benefits.

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 said that they are only paid 4,000 to 5,000 rupees per month.

Although critical ASHA services have been crippled, the state government is refusing to give in to the workers' demands.

This week, the ASHA workers appealed to mainstream cinema actors like Mammootty, Mohanlal and Kamal Hassan not to participate in an event organised by the Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan on November 1. The ruling Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist) and its cohorts claim the state is "extreme poverty free."

## Punjab power utility contract workers protest in Ludhiana for permanent jobs

Powercom and Transco Contractual Employees Union members held a protest march in Ludhiana on Tuesday to demand permanent jobs and against exploitation by contractors. The union alleged that the present state government had promised to cancel its privatisation policy and make all outsourced contract workers permanent, but after three years, no worker had been made permanent.

Workers want the privatisation policy cancelled, and all workers to be directly included in the department, including receiving a minimum living wage, guaranteed permanent jobs, and pensions for accident victims.

## Punjab Roadways and PUNBUS contract workers oppose privatisation

The Punjab Roadways and PUNBUS Operators Union called off a midday protest after one hour on October 23. The workers were opposing the issuing of a tender by the government to privatise bus operations. The union claimed that the Aam Admi Part (AAP) government had assured them that the tender would be cancelled.

A union spokesman said that the AAP government had promised to end privatisation before coming to power but was now attempting to hand over public transport services to corporate groups.

The protest at the Golden Gate in Amritsar led to tense moments when the police intervened. Some workers laid down in front of buses to block their movement, while police tried to remove them.

Contract workers were demanding permanent jobs instead of privatisation. Other workers protested over the continued delay in salary payments, saying that wages previously paid on the 1st of each month were now not being paid until the 20th or 25th, severely affecting their financial stability.

The 8,000 workers went on strike for several days on August 14 to demand permanent jobs, ending of contract hiring and new buses. It followed a three-day strike in January over the same issues.

## Jammu Public Health Engineering casual workers demand permanent jobs

Public Health Engineering (PHE) daily wage workers protested in Srinagar on Monday demanding permanent jobs, higher wages and increased emoluments. Workers rallied in front of the Jal Shakti office.

There are about 67,000 daily wage workers employed by the PHE in Srinagar. The government had appointed a seven-member committee to supposedly resolve their grievances, but workers said this would not solve their issues and was a half-baked solution to the system.

## Bangladesh: Dhaka police attack protesting madrasa teachers

On Wednesday, police attacked teachers from Ebteedayee madrasas demonstrating outside the National Press Club in Dhaka since October 13 to demand nationalisation of their institutions. Police used water cannons and sound grenades, injuring 50 teachers on Link Road near the Secretariat.

The teachers also want rapid approval and publication of a gazette notification for the 1,089 institutions whose files have already been scrutinised for MPO inclusion. They have also demanded a circular inviting MPO applications from recognised non-grant-receiving Ebteedayee madrasas, creation of pre-primary posts similar to those in

primary schools and establishment of a separate directorate for Ebtedayee madrasas. MPO schools receive financial support from the federal government, which covers teachers' basic salaries.

The teachers were organised by the Independent Ebtedayee Madrasa Teachers' Unity Movement Implementation Committee, which claimed that the education ministry had announced on January 28 that it would phase in nationalisation of Ebtedayee madrasas. This has not happened.

### **Bangladesh: AA Knit Spin apparel workers protest factory closure**

Apparel workers from the AA Knit Spin factory in Sripur sub-district, Gazipur demonstrated at the factory gate on Monday after being confronted with a notice at the gate saying the plant had closed indefinitely.

They said payment of their salaries and other entitlements became irregular in recent months and that those having worked for over five years had not received their service benefits, annual leave payments, meal allowances, incentive bonuses, or attendance bonuses. The workers only received their September salaries on Sunday.

### **Genex Power hydro project workers in Queensland strike over unsafe accommodation**

About 160 construction workers from four unions at Genex Power's pumped hydro project at Kidston, northern Queensland, walked off the job on October 23 to protest unacceptable conditions at the workforce camp. The fly-in fly-out workers are members of the Electrical Trades Union (ETU), Australian Manufacturing Workers Union, Construction Forestry and Maritime Employees Union and the Plumbing and Pipe Trades Employees Union, and employed by construction contractor McConnell Dowell John Holland Joint Venture.

Workers said unsafe food standards causing illness, mould exposure in old dongas, and unclean accommodation conditions, including unwashed linen and un-serviced rooms, are among their complaints. The ETU said that the company had failed to take meaningful action to address the issues.

The pumped storage hydro project is at an old and remote gold mine site. Workers' accommodation is 40 years old. Striking workers said bad food and unhygienic accommodation had left them fatigued, unwell, and increasingly anxious about their safety and wellbeing.

### **Fire sprinkler installation workers in South Australia strike for multi-employer agreement**

Over 100 members of the Communications Electrical and Plumbing Union (CEPU) held a series of stopwork meetings on October 22 through to October 24 to discuss their next move in their campaign for a Sprinkler Fitting Industry Multi-Employer Enterprise Agreement covering seven fire protection companies in South Australia. The workers are currently covered by different enterprise agreements.

A multi-employer agreement is a new provision under the Fair Work Commission's enterprise agreement system. Workers want wages and conditions standardised in the industry.

ARA Fire Protection, Combined Fire Protection, Proficient Fire Protection, Diverse Fire Protection, Shield Fire Protection, RNW Fire Protection and Trojan Fire Protection, who employ 127 CEPU members, are opposing workers' demands.

### **TK Elevators technicians in Western Australia begin industrial action**

About 30 installation and maintenance technicians from TK Elevators in Western Australia rallied outside their factory in Perth on October 24 to plan the first stages of industrial action in their campaign for an industry standard enterprise agreement. Electrical Trades Union members voted on October 21 to approve taking protected industrial action that could include unlimited work stoppages of 1 to 24 hours duration, plus up to seven work bans.

Workers want their new enterprise agreement brought into line with the rest of the elevator industry. They complained that the company has been reaping profits for years while offering the lowest on-call rates and conditions in the industry.

### **Striking maintenance workers at Woodside in Western Australia reject latest pay offer**

About 60 workers employed by maintenance contractor Legeneering at five Woodside oil and gas offshore production facilities in Western Australia are continuing rolling stoppages and work bans after overwhelmingly rejecting Legeneering's latest non-union enterprise agreement. Industrial action, which began on September 5, also included about 170 maintenance workers employed by contractor Monadelphous (Monos).

The workers' bargaining unit is the Offshore Alliance (OA), which is made up of the AWU and the Maritime Union of Australia.

Legeneering and Monos, in October, offered a 20 percent uplift in rates in separate four-year agreements which OA said failed to compensate for a non-union deal with workers at Woodside facilities in 2017 and continued each year since then. OA wants the wage deal to align with benchmark industry standards saying that Legeneering's latest offer was still substandard.

### **Rix's Creek coal mine workers continue strike after rejecting latest pay offer**

Mining and Energy Union (MEU) members at the Bloomfield Group-owned Rix's Creek open-cut coal mine near Singleton, New South Wales remain on strike after 92 percent rejected management's latest offer. The 250 workers have been on strike for four weeks seeking an improved pay offer and accident pay lifted to parity with other pits.

The MEU said Bloomfield's latest offer was worse than one already rejected by workers. "It was an antagonistic move that has only deepened our members' resolve," a union spokesman said.

Bloomfield is not budging from its original pay rise offer of 16.75 percent over four years. The company told the media that its pay rise offer was not possible unless the MEU agreed to additional productivity "reforms" or reductions in operating costs. The MEU claimed that the

company has started advertising for replacement labour and is operating heavy equipment using management level staff.

Bloomfield is a billion-dollar family-owned company with approval to extract 1.3 million tonnes of coal per annum from its open cut mine.

### **Public sector workers hold rolling stoppages across Tasmania**

Thousands of Tasmania's public sector workers, including teachers, health workers, firefighters, child safety workers, park rangers and others, stopped work for up to four hours over several days across Tasmania this week to attend rallies in opposition to the Rockliff Liberal state government's latest proposed pay rise offer.

The action by members of the Health and Community Services Union (HACSU), Australian Education Union (AEU) and the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) followed six months of cancelled meetings, after which the government proposed a one-year agreement with a 3 percent pay rise and no improvement in conditions, to be followed by further negotiations.

The CPSU says the government has refused the union's demands for improved working conditions in several enterprise agreements expiring this year. Its members want a 21.5 percent wage rise over three years, beginning with an 11 percent rise in the first year of the agreements.

The AEU's pay rise demand is the same as CPSU members, with a reduction in class sizes and career advancement in line with the mainline states. Another demand is for changes to the current employment arrangement for teaching assistants who are not paid for a full year and are stood down during school holidays.

HACSU members from public hospitals, ambulance and community services are demanding wage parity with their counterparts in other Australian states, safe workloads and proper staffing. They said the offer was insulting, devalued their commitment to the community and lacked respect.

The Rockliff government has cancelled bargaining meetings with striking unions, and maintains their offer is fair and affordable. Following the rally of 1,000 workers on Hobart's parliament lawns on Thursday, unions said members would be stepping up action.

### **Cash delivery workers in Victoria and Tasmania continue industrial action**

The Transport Workers Union (TWU), covering 150 cash-in-transit security guards at Armaguard, Prosegur and Point 2 Point in Victoria and Tasmania, are maintaining work bans put in place last week in response to a delay in finalising a new enterprise agreement. TWU members stopped work on October 24 and the following Monday. They have also imposed indefinite bans on overtime and weekend work.

The union says its members' wages have not increased since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic or kept up with cost-of-living increases. Union members are calling for an end to the wage disparity that exists between Armaguard and Prosegur workers that has left some legacy staff earning between 10 and 35 percent less than others doing the same work. They also want increased job security, a safer workplace, allowance increases, and a lunch-on-truck allowance.

Workers are concerned about delays in the finalisation of a new funding model with the banks and supermarkets, which would guarantee the future of the cash delivery industry.

TWU has threatened to call a strike for the Melbourne Cup Carnival horse racing weekend holiday if the company does not make an agreement. Linfox, which owns Armaguard, Prosegur and Point 2 Point, is refusing to negotiate. The industrial action will impact on ATMs, banks and retail businesses.

### **Victoria's forest fire fighters resume industrial action**

Australian Workers Union (AWU) forest fire fighters in Victoria have resumed industrial action after their employer the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action (DEECA) backed out of an enterprise deal accepted by the workers in May. On Wednesday, hundreds of forest fire fighters rallied outside parliament in Melbourne, condemning DEECA and the state Labor government for walking away from the original agreement.

Prior to that agreement AWU members voted in March to take future industrial action that could include unlimited work stoppages from 1 hour to an indefinite period, and up to 20 different work bans.

Workers rejected DEECA's latest EA offer as inferior. It changes previously agreed to provisions including backpay to no backpay and the 3 percent annual wage increases to 1.5 percent wage rises paid six monthly.

The union wants the new agreement to address the gender pay gap that has surged with male fire fighters earning 9.5 percent more than their female counterparts, the provision of adequate respiratory protection and to address urgently the serious chassis and sub frame faults that have required taking its entire fleet of firefighting G-Wagons and Unimog's off the road for repairs just at the start of the fire season.

### **Flemington racetrack workers' union ends industrial action and claims a win following court decision**

The Australian Workers Union, representing 33 groundskeepers and track staff at the Flemington horse racing track in Melbourne called off future industrial action by its members claiming it had a win in the Fair Work Commission against the Victoria Racing Club's proposed enterprise agreement. No details were forthcoming from the union except that the decision prevented cuts to members' entitlements.

The workers held a 24-hour stoppage on Wednesday to demand an improved pay offer and in opposition to cuts in entitlements in the VRC's proposed enterprise agreement. Workers were demanding annual 4 percent pay increases over three years while VRC offered only 3 percent annual increases. Negotiations broke down when VRC refused to continue negotiations, forcing the workers to take Wednesday's strike action.

The VRC responded by applying to the FWC to prevent further industrial action leading up to the Melbourne Cup Carnival commencing this weekend. The AWU announced on Thursday that it had won a "strong deal" in the court decision, which members voted to accept.



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