

# 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: Assam National Health Mission workers strike for permanent jobs and entitlements**

Thousands of National Health Mission (NHM) workers held a three-day statewide strike in Assam on Monday demanding permanent jobs and equal pay for equal work. They held sit-down protests in several cities, including Nalbari and Tezpur, raising slogans like “provide pay scale” and “accept our demands.” Health services were severely affected during the strike with doctors at some clinics unavailable.

The All Assam Health and Technical Welfare Association and NHM-Assam, a forum of over 20,000 NHM workers, coordinated the strike, saying that their future was uncertain given the government’s indifference towards the demand for permanent jobs.

Other demands were for gratuity and pension benefits, jobs for their family in case of death at work, uniform leave policies and two years of parental leave. They also demanded that NHM workers be transferred directly into the health department’s new vacancies.

## **Tea estate workers in Assam strike for pay and festival bonus**

Hundreds of tea estate workers in Cachar district, Assam went on indefinite strike at the Arcuttipore and Chappanahall estates on October 31, demanding outstanding wages and festival bonus. Workers said they would intensify their struggle if demands were not met before the local festival of Chath Puja. One worker said, “we could forego the bonus, but not our wages.”

## **Andhra Pradesh construction workers strike again for overdue wages**

About 34 contract building workers at the Statue of Social Justice (Ambedkar Smriti Vanam) in Vijayawada, stopped work and protested in front of the site on October 31 to demand 9 months of unpaid wages. The workers previously walked off the job on October 4 over the same issue.

## **Kerala: ASHA unions call end to 265-day statewide strike with demands unmet**

The Kerala ASHA Health Workers Association, affiliated with the Socialist Unity Centre of India-Communist Union, ordered 26,000 striking members back to work on November 1, ending a 265-day strike with none of workers’ long-pending demands resolved.

The poorly paid ASHA (community health) workers, who receive very few entitlements, held out against threats of sackings from the government and frequent attacks by police on their sit-down protest at Thiruvananthapuram. Some workers went on a hunger strike, while others shaved their heads.

Workers were demanding that their monthly wage be increased from a meagre 7,000 rupees (\$US80) to about 21,000 rupees, plus an increased pension and withdrawal of the compulsory retirement age of 62.

Workers were forced to accept a meagre 1,000 rupee (\$US11.30) pay increase and herded back to work with none of their other demands being met.

## **Tamil Nadu fishermen in Ramanathapuram demand relief funds**

Fishermen in Ramanathapuram held a protest on November 4 demanding relief and saving funds during the lean fishing season. The All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) said more than 6,900 fishermen were in need of relief funds.

The desperate fishermen and their families had been excluded from the national relief funds during the lean season. They received no income due to fishing bans during the cyclone periods. Their only support has to come from the government.

## **Punjab: Electricity workers protest privatisation**

Outsourced contract workers from the power distribution company Powercom demonstrated at Phagwara against privatisation, exploitation by contractors and for permanent jobs on November 1. The action was part of a wider campaign by members of the Powercom and Transco Theka Mulazam Union, which included a protest march in Ludhiana on October 28.

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

## **Assam plantation workers and students protest transfer of land to Oil India Limited**

On October 31, about 700 plantation workers and students protested at Dibrugarh against the Sathyarayan tea estate management's decision to transfer almost 20 bighas (124 acres) of land to Oil India Limited (OIL). Workers said the land transfer would affect their livelihood. The protest was organised by the All Adivasi Students Association of Assam.

### **Bangladeshi community health care workers demand unpaid salaries and permanent jobs**

Around 100 community health care providers continued their demonstration for the second consecutive day on Wednesday, demanding payment of 16 months of unpaid salaries and permanent employment. They rallied outside the Community Clinic Health Support Trust office at the headquarters of the Bangladesh Medical Research Council in Dhaka, chanting slogans. On two previous occasions, the government has falsely assured the workers they would be paid.

A protester, holding her 5-month-old daughter, spent the entire day on the premises. She said "My baby is suffering from fever but I have no choice but to bring her with me. Living without salary for 16 months is almost impossible." Another protester said 662 employees joined community clinics in March 2023 and received regular salaries until June last year, but have not been paid since.

### **Bangladesh: Chittagong Port workers protest privatisation**

Hundreds of port workers staged a hunger strike on November 1 to protest the Yunus government's decision to lease the state-owned Chattogram Port's New Mooring Container Terminal (NCT) and Laldia Char to foreign operators. They demanded that the government withdraw plans to lease any other asset at the port to local or foreign companies.

The government had planned to lease the NCT to UAE-based operator DP World and the Laldia Char to Danish-based Maersk. On September 14, thousands of Chattogram port workers held a street protest over the issue.

The protest was organised by the Workers-Employees Unity Council, representing 16 national trade union centres.

### **Bangladeshi journalists rally across the country with 39 demands**

On November 1, The Bangladesh Federal Union of Journalists (BFUJ) held protests across the country with multiple demands aimed at ensuring press freedom and journalists' welfare. A rally was held in front of the Jatiya Press Club in Dhaka.

Key demands were for the immediate implementation of the ninth wage board and formation of the tenth, along with a unified wage board for print, electronic, online and multimedia journalists, and enforcement of the "No Wage Board, No Media" policy to ensure fair pay and benefits. Another demand was for the formulation of a journalist protection policy and establishment of a separate labour court for journalists.

Other demands were for two weekly holidays in line with other sectors, the end to harassment, intimidation and killing of journalists with speedy trials for all past murder cases including that of Sagar-Runi, abolition of all anti-media laws and guarantees for editorial and institutional

independence of media houses, fair wages for district correspondents—many of whom work without pay—safeguards against arbitrary dismissal, inclusion of journalists in state policymaking and ensuring that no intelligence agency interferes in media operations.

On August 7, journalist Asaduzzaman Tuhin was killed with machete blows after filming armed men chasing a young man in Gazipur. The day before, reporter Anwar Hossain was seriously injured by brick blows in the same city, while investigating cases of extortion. According to the Committee for the Protection of Journalists, 13 journalists have been killed in Bangladesh since 1992.

### **Pakistan International Airlines engineers strike over safety and pay**

Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) engineers stopped work on Monday, forcing the cancellation of more than 55 flights affecting Karachi, Lahore and Islamabad airports. The Society of Aircraft Engineers of Pakistan (SAEP) said its members would not return to work until the airline's CEO changed his attitude toward their concerns.

A media report said the engineers haven't received a raise in eight years and the airline is facing a serious shortage of spare parts. It alleged that the engineers have been coerced to clear aircraft for flights in breach of aviation rules.

SAEP said the engineers had been wearing black armbands for almost two-and-a-half months to press their demands, but the airline's management refused to enter negotiations.

The Pakistan Essential Services (Maintenance) Act is in force at the national airline, which makes strikes or walkouts illegal. PIA's management ordered strict action against the engineers and accused them of trying to sabotage the airline's privatisation.

The government is in the final stage of selling a majority stake in the airline, a key condition of Pakistan's \$US7 billion International Monetary Fund bailout, which requires the government to offload loss-making state-owned enterprises.

### **Infrabuild steel mill workers in Victoria continue rolling strikes for new enterprise agreement**

About 100 workers at the Infrabuild steel mill in Laverton, Melbourne are maintaining rolling 12 and 24-hour stoppages, which started on October 24. They held a 24-hour stoppage on Wednesday, their third since action began.

The Australian Workers Union (AWU) has allowed negotiations for a new enterprise agreement to be drawn out since 2021, amid concerns over safety failures and falling real wages. The union said it finally called the strike after workers "reached their limit."

The company's last offer was rejected by workers as substandard. Workers want the new agreement to include a wage rise that reflects the true cost-of-living increase and addresses their concerns over safety and job security.

InfraBuild's Laverton plant processes recycled scrap metal into steel products. The company claims its Laverton site is the biggest such operation in Australia.

### **Keolis Downer bus drivers in Newcastle apply work bans for**

## **improved pay offer**

More than 200 bus drivers from Keolis Downer-Hunter, who service Newcastle and Lake Macquarie in New South Wales, put in place low-level work bans on Monday. They threatened to carry out 12- and/or 24-hour strikes by the end of November if the company fails to return to the negotiation table with an improved offer on wages, safety and working conditions.

The bans include sounding the bus horn when leaving and entering the depot, not driving buses with less than a full tank of fuel and not operating a bus without a first-aid kit on board. Drivers are maintaining action they put place in April, when they turned off their Opal card readers (fare collecting machines) giving commuters free travel.

The latest action by the Rail Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) members is part of a protracted enterprise bargaining process. It followed 24-hour stoppages in April and September.

Workers are demanding 8 percent per annum pay increases over three years, improved safety, at least 72 hours' notice for changes to drivers' shifts and no reduction in conditions. The company has offered a 10 percent total pay increase over three years, with an additional 6 percent over three years for employees in the Trainee Year 1 classification.

The state government awarded the French firm Keolis Downer a 10-year contract to provide bus commuter services in the Newcastle and Lake Macquarie areas in 2016. Workers are calling for the operation of the bus service to be returned to the government. Drivers have begun wearing red berets which state "French government gets paid, our bus is delayed."

## **Healthscope nurses and midwives in Victoria take action over stalled wage negotiations**

Over 2,500 Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation (ANMF) members at 12 Healthscope facilities in Victoria began industrial action on October 28 over stalled pay rise negotiations. The limited "action" includes wearing campaign T-shirts, as well as bans on redeployment, overtime, working outside ordinary hours and some administrative work.

The ANMF claims Healthscope's offer would leave wages about 10 percent behind those in the public sector by the end of 2027. The union is seeking pay rises starting from July 2025 of 4.24 percent, 3.5 percent in October 2025, 4 percent in July 2026 and 5 percent in July 2027, while the company has offered just 11.75 percent over four years.

The union alleged that Healthscope is refusing to finalise the enterprise agreement if a new salary packaging clause (which would result in nurses and midwives receiving only a fraction of any benefit) is not included in the enterprise deal.

Healthscope, with 37 facilities nationwide and in debt for \$1.6 billion, wants employees to support the creation of a not-for-profit entity—PurposeCo—as a means of keeping as many of its facilities within the one organisation as possible. If accepted, Healthscope will receive up to 90 percent of staff salary packaging benefits to support operational costs, including servicing corporate debt.

The ANMF claimed that Healthscope's rejection of its wage claim means that rates of pay will remain behind all comparable employers in Victoria, including St Vincent's Private Hospitals, St John of God and Epworth, all of which provide the full benefit of salary packaging.

## **Queensland government trades workers strike for 36-hour week**

Hundreds of state public sector trades workers from QHealth, QBuild and the Department of Transport and Main Roads (TMR) walked off job sites for 24 hours on Tuesday and held rallies in major Queensland cities, including outside state parliament in Brisbane, to demand a 36-hour week. The action followed a series of ad hoc stoppages at all departments following their 24-hour statewide strike on September 1.

The workers are represented by four unions—the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union, Construction Forestry Maritime Employees Union, Electrical Trades Union and the Plumbers Union—who say a 36-hour week would bring them into line with "white-collar" public servants.

## **Curtin University educators strike for better pay and conditions**

On Wednesday, National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) members from Curtin University in Western Australia stopped work for over an hour and attended a lunchtime rally on the university's Perth campus as part of their campaign for better pay and conditions in a new enterprise agreement. Their current agreement covering over 800 workers expired on June 30.

The NTEU said that after 11 meetings management put forward a proposed agreement that does not adequately address members demands, which includes a 20 percent wage increase over four years, action on workload, improved workplace flexibility, job security, casual conversion and strengthening fixed term contract regulations.

The union accused university management of running the university like a corporation and at the expense of education. It claimed that at least half the teaching workload falls on casuals, with no commitment from management to make them permanent. One educator complained that as a casual he has no office and no phone if students want to contact him.

## **South Australian public health nurses and midwives protest**

On October 30, thousands of public sector nurses and midwives rallied in front of South Australia's parliament house in Adelaide, to protest the Malinauskas Labor government's latest pay offer.

The Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation (ANMF) said that if the "disgraceful" 13 percent pay rise offer over four years was accepted, South Australian nurses would remain the lowest paid in Australia.

According to the ANMF, their members' low wages are a major reason for the state's poor workforce recruitment and retention rate. It claimed that health worker shortages are driving rising exploitation and excessive overtime, leading to exhaustion and burnout.

## **Queensland health professionals begin industrial action for better conditions and safe staffing**

About 2,000 public sector health professionals and clinical assistants across Queensland began industrial action on Friday in their fight for reduced workload, better conditions and safer staffing levels. The workers are represented by the United Workers Union (UWU) and include medical imaging staff, radiographers, radiation therapists, nuclear medicine scientists, pharmacists and oral health professionals.

The low-level action, which will take place at worksites around the state, includes providing business cards to patients asking them to support workers by signing an open letter to the health minister, writing messages of protest on windows, doors and notice boards and bans on work that does not impact urgent patient care.

The decision to take action followed 10 months of failed negotiations with the state Liberal government over its proposed “unacceptable” enterprise agreement, which included an 8 percent pay rise over three years in return for cuts to existing attraction and retention allowances. The union claimed that the proposed agreement would see some workers lose up to \$30,000 in take home pay.

Conciliation talks between the UWU and the government began in the Queensland Industrial Relations court on Friday. The UWU threatened that members would continue to escalate industrial action until the government recognised their value with a reasonable offer.

### **Tasmanian public sector health and community services workers escalate industrial action**

The Health and Community Services Union (HACSU), covering workers in Tasmania’s public hospitals, community health and ambulance service, announced new limited industrial action measures on October 29. These include bans on administrative tasks, cleaning, answering phones, collecting blood samples and linen services. The union says its bans will impact revenue collection and force management to step in to cover some tasks.

The action is part of a wider campaign of public sector workers, including teachers, health workers, firefighters, child safety workers, park rangers and others, who stopped work for up to four hours over several days across Tasmania last week to attend rallies in opposition to the state Liberal government’s latest proposed pay rise offer.

The action included members of the HACSU, Australian Education Union (AEU) and the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU). It 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 HACSU wants a three-year agreement that includes wage parity with other Australian states, safe workloads and proper staffing. The Rockliff government has cancelled bargaining with all unions and maintains its offer is fair and affordable.



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