

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: Karnataka municipal workers hold state-wide protest for permanent jobs

On Tuesday, unions affiliated to the All India Municipal Workers Federation (AICCTU) held a state-wide protest in Karnataka. They were demanding the abolition of the contracting system in solid-waste management and direct payment of wages to all drivers and assistants currently employed on a contract basis.

More than 50,000 municipal workers from solid waste management, transportation and administration protested in major cities including Bangalore, Hubli, Dharwad, Vijayapura, Kalburgi, Koppala and Raichur.

Protesters complained about being forced to work under fraudulent contracts for decades without offers of permanency. They said they were denied the minimum wage and other benefits and cannot meet their family's daily needs.

Workers alleged that the Chief Minister, Basavaraja Bommai, had never fulfilled an earlier assurance that the contracting system would be abolished, and they would be brought into the direct payment system. Unions threatened to call a complete strike if demands were not met.

The protests are part of a long running struggle by Karnataka municipal workers for secure jobs and a liveable wage. On March 18, over 15,000 sanitation workers from 330 urban municipal bodies across Karnataka stopped work and protested in Bengaluru against the contract labour system.

In July last year, thousands of contract municipal workers across the state went on strike demanding permanent jobs. Each time the unions have called off their action after accepting false assurances from the government that demands will be implemented.

Hospital sanitary workers in Odisha protest to defend jobs

Health services were disrupted at the Capital Hospital at Bhubaneswar, in India's eastern state of Odisha, when sanitary workers stopped work on Monday to protest threatened layoffs and their replacement by an outsourcing agency. They alleged the threat was made by the hospital director.

The protest led to the closure of some wards and the cancellation of several surgeries. Workers said they would not call off the protest until they got a written assurance that their jobs were safe.

Haryana rural social health workers maintain strike after seven weeks

In the face of government repression, police attacks and arrests of union leaders, 20,000 ASHA (Accredited Social Health Activist) workers in Haryana are maintaining their strike begun on August 8. Strikers are demanding better working conditions, higher pay and permanent jobs.

Protest marches on Tuesday by scores of ASHA workers in Karnal and Ambale were stopped by police. Strikers are holding daily sit-down protests outside their district offices.

The workers are mainly women from farming families hence the support they are receiving from the (Samyukt Kisam Morcha) farmer organisation. ASHA workers are critical frontline health employees who provide home-based care to pregnant women, mothers, and children, as well as monitoring the health of the community. Due to their strike, immunisation and other health-related services like pre- and post-natal care and other health programs are affected, particularly in rural areas.

The Asha Workers Union Haryana State Committee is demanding improved working conditions, including a fixed monthly salary of 26,000 rupees (\$US313), regular increments, insurance benefits, and adequate training and resources to carry out their work effectively.

ASHA workers are currently paid an honorarium of between 7,000 and 9,000 rupees a month, which includes incentives. These workers have not had a pay rise since 2018, despite their workload increasing three-fold due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Striking Chhattisgarh government health workers sacked

At least 5,000 striking government health workers across Chhattisgarh state have been dismissed since the government declared their strike illegal and activated the draconian Essential Services Maintenance Act (ESMA). Under this act striking workers can face heavy fines and imprisonment.

About 40,000 health workers walked off the job across the state on August 22 on an indefinite strike. Workers from 33 districts travelled to the state's capital Raipur where they held a sit-down protest. Demands include increased recruitment, COVID allowances and a salary increase.

A spokesperson from the Chhattisgarh Health Federation said they had worked two years through the COVID pandemic without leave or recognition.

Power utility workers in Jammu and Kashmir protest low wages

Hundreds of workers from the Power Development Department (PDD) and Power Development Corporation (PDC) stopped work and demonstrated in Bemina on Monday to protest the failure of administrators to act on long-pending demands. The strike followed a series of protests over several years to demand salary review, in-situ promotions, leave salary and against the withdrawal of the General Provident Fund.

The Jammu and Kashmir Electric Employees Union (JKEEU) demanded the de-linking of the salary of PDC workers on deputation from the grant-in-aid fund, and increased budgets so their wages are on par with workers in a similar class in other government departments. This should include the payment of a deputation allowance to PDD workers in Ladakh.

The union also demanded the regularisation of workers from the Project Development Loan (PDL) and Transmission and Distribution Losses (TDL) departments by creation of class 4 posts. It also wants jobs for the next of kin of deceased employees and restoration of the General Provident Fund.

On September 9, Jammu and Kashmir Electrical Engineering Graduates Association (JKEEGA) members stopped work for 24 hours on September 9 and demonstrated in Jammu to protest the PDD's failure to fill vacant posts as previously promised. PDD workers ended a four-day strike in December 2021 after PDD assured them that all vacant posts would be filled.

Bangladesh: Terminated jute mill workers in Khulna demand arrears and jobs

Terminated workers from five closed private jute mills in Khulna demonstrated in Khulna on September 10 over six demands, including payment of outstanding wages and reopening of the mills. They gathered outside Janata Market in the city in the morning, defying police interventions. They later blocked the Phulbari Gate rail level crossing.

The five mills, Mohsen, Afil, Sonali, Ajax, and Jute Spinus, in the Shiromani Industrial Area, have been closed for several years. A representative from the Private Jute, Yarn and Textile Mill Workers' Federation accused the mill owners of selling the properties without paying workers their arrears.

The federation threatened to hold a protest at the Phulbari Gate Janata Market Square on September 15 and again block the Phulbari Gate level crossing on September 17 if its demands are ignored.

Chevron LNG processing workers in Western Australia step up strike action

In a dispute over wages and conditions, 500 workers at Chevron's LNG processing facilities in Western Australia have stepped up strike action begun on September 7 at the Gorgon and Wheatstone onshore plants. After a week of short duration rolling stoppages, and bans, workers on Thursday began two weeks of 24 one-hour stoppages. Chevron has begun removing contractors from their facilities to reduce losses.

The plants produce about 7 percent of the world's LNG supply, and about 47 percent of Western Australia's domestic gas, which fuels the state's huge iron ore mining and metals processing activities. European benchmark gas prices have risen 5.5 percent over the past week, partly because of the risk of disruptions to Australian LNG production.

Members of the Australian Workers Union and Electrical Trades Union, represented by the bargaining unit Offshore Alliance (OA), are in dispute over Chevron's proposed enterprise agreement. OA claimed that the proposed agreement will give Chevron the right to replace permanent employees with low-wage labour hire workers, allow unilateral changes to rosters, the right for Chevron to coerce workers to work on other facilities and other panels with no reimbursement for expenses incurred by the worker.

The unions want to lock in benchmark industry pay and conditions, control over rosters, and restrictions on the use of contractors.

Chevron has filed an application in the Fair Work Commission (FWC) for an intractable bargaining declaration which is due to be heard on September 22. If the commission rules in favour of Chevron, the commission will have the power to arbitrate on the dispute and force workers to accept an agreement. Meanwhile, the FWC has ordered Chevron and Offshore Alliance back into mediation until September 22.

SRG Global workers at Alcoa alumina refinery in Western Australia hold second strike

Over 40 workers from SRG Global, an industrial services contractor, stopped work for four days at the Alcoa alumina smelter in Perth, Western Australia on September 7. Members of the Construction Forestry Maritime Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) and Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) are in dispute with SRG Global over its proposed enterprise agreement.

The action followed a 24-hour strike on August 25 and a 3-hour strike by SRG Global workers at the South32-Worsley smelter on August 23. Alcoa SRG workers want a specific site agreement and the same conditions as South32-Worsley employees.

Workers want pay increases that compensate for the increasing cost of living, back-pay to the previous agreement expiry date, income protection, travel allowance and compensation for workers who hold additional competencies and several other claims.

The latest strike was sparked after the company presented a revised offer which the unions claimed did not come close to members' demands. The unions have been trying to stitch up a deal since March.

SRG Global, an Australian company with a 3,300-strong workforce, provides construction and maintenance services mainly in the mining industry and for large infrastructure projects.

Nurses at Calvary Health Care Tasmania hold stop-work meeting

Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation (ANMF) members at Calvary Health Care hospital in Tasmania held a stop-work meeting outside the St Vincent hospital in Launceston on Thursday to hear an update of progress in negotiations for a new enterprise agreement. Nurses held placards stating, "We need mandated minimum staffing" and "No Care is Not Fair."

The ANMF's negotiations with Calvary, a major private health provider, began in June but are now deadlocked. Calvary is refusing to raise wages by more than 3 percent per annum, or to meet nurses' demands for increased staffing levels in alignment with those in Tasmania's public hospitals. The current CPI rate for Tasmania is 5.5 percent meaning Calvary's 3 percent offer is a real pay cut.

Nurses have voted to step up industrial action that could include work

bans and limited strikes from fifteen minutes to twenty-four hours.

New South Wales ambulance paramedics protest low pay

About 50 paramedics from the Ambulance Division of the Health Services Union (ADHSU) demonstrated outside the state premier's office of Chris Minns on Tuesday demanding professional rates of pay that reflect their increased skills and training over the past decade.

New responsibilities mean that paramedics are now required to do complex diagnostics and administer medication. The union claimed paramedics in other states are paid up to about 40 percent more than their NSW counterparts. The HSU and state Labor government are currently in negotiations over the issue. Paramedics said they will continue protesting during negotiations.

In July, the HSU pushed through an unprecedented below-inflation wage deal negotiated with the Minns government. A slim majority of HSU members, which includes low paid health workers, accepted the deal which included a flat \$3,502 pay increase. As a result, low paid workers got an increase above 4 percent while professional workers on a higher wage got increases as low as 2.5 percent. In both cases the pay increase negotiated by the HSU was well below the state's inflation rate of about 6.6 percent.

Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology vocational educators strike

About 1,400 members of the National Tertiary Educators Union (NTEU) walked off the job for 24 hours at all Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) campuses on Wednesday in their dispute over the university's proposed enterprise agreement. The action followed a stop-work meeting on September 7 and the imposition of work various bans.

Members rejected RMIT's proposed agreement, which included sub-inflation 3.5 percent annual wage rises, extension of the agreement to four years and 13 percent superannuation. RMIT management also wants a new sessional staff category, increased teaching and work hours as well as making changes to classification level testing.

A priority claim of NTEU members is for secure employment. About 50 percent of vocational educators are casual and living precariously. Many are forced to take two or more jobs to survive. Recent research by the University of Melbourne's Centre for the Study of Higher Education shows that over the past twenty years, the unions have endorsed agreements with universities that failed to improve job security or the working conditions of casual educational workers.

The NTEU's current demand for annual 5 percent salary increases will cut educator's living standards. The June quarter annualised CPI rate for Melbourne is 5.6 percent. The current agreement expired in January 2022.



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