

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and New Zealand

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*The World Socialist Web Site invites workers and other readers to contribute to this regular feature.*

## Bangladesh: Police attack protesting apparel workers in Gazipur

Police brutally attacked protesting apparel workers on Monday when they blocked the Dhaka-Tangail highway in Gazipur for nearly five hours. Gazipur Industrial Police deployed to the protest attacked workers with tear-gas shells and sound grenades, causing injuries to 12 people from both sides.

Workers from the Karim Textile factory of the Purbani Group, located in the Telirchala area of Gazipur's Kaliakair subdistrict, were demonstrating for a monthly minimum wage of 15,000 taka (\$US136), nearly double their current 8,000 taka rate, which was set in 2018. The protesting workers were quickly joined by workers from other factories, including from Lago Apparel, Hydro Oxide Sweater Factory, APS Apparels and the Bay Footwear Factory.

In ongoing negotiations in the Minimum Wages Board, apparel factory owners proposed 10,400 taka (\$US94.23) as the minimum wage. The government and factory owners are determined to keep Bangladeshi garment workers' minimum wages below the poverty wages of garment workers in competing countries.

According to the Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies, the minimum wage for garment workers is \$307 in Turkey, \$262 in China, \$250 in Malaysia, \$244 in the Philippines, \$194 in Cambodia, \$168 in Vietnam, \$137 in Indonesia and \$128 in India.

## India: Maharashtra food delivery workers strike for government regulation

Food delivery workers for Swiggy, Zomato, Ola and Uber went on strike in Pune, Maharashtra state, on Wednesday, to demand proper government regulation of the gig employment platforms. The Indian Gig Workers' Front said proper regulation would provide social security. Their demands were put to the Maharashtra chief minister.

In a related issue, 10,000 Swiggy food delivery workers in Mumbai called off a city-wide strike on October 10 after reaching agreement with Swiggy on proposed work changes. Swiggy had intended to double the travel radius for deliveries and reduce pay and incentives. Swiggy agreed to roll back the extended radius and to increase the base delivery fee.

## Tamil Nadu contract conservancy workers in Coimbatore on strike for higher pay

About 450 contract conservancy workers from the Coimbatore City Municipal Corporation began an indefinite strike on October 20. They are demanding permanent jobs with a daily wage of 712 rupees (\$US8.60). Despite repeated appeals to the corporation, their pay remains at only 486 rupees a day. Twenty permanent workers joined the strike in support of the demands.

Workers are demanding entitlements like pensions and compensation for the children of deceased workers, in the form of a guaranteed job in the corporation.

## Haryana rural sanitation workers strike for higher pay

Haryana rural sanitation workers went on a statewide strike and demonstrated in Faridabad demanding higher wages on Wednesday. They joined about 11,000 rural sanitation workers in the state who had been on strike for the past two weeks.

Workers complained that a rural worker's monthly wage is only 14,000 rupees (\$168.40), much less than urban sanitation workers, who get up to 22,000 rupees a month. The strike was organised by the Gramin Safai Karamchari Union.

## Sri Lankan public sector workers continue protests for pay increase

The Local Government Non-Permanent Employees Union and the Joint Local Government Employees Union organised hundreds of public sector workers from Galle, Matara and other local governments to hold a protest march to the Governor's Secretariat Southern Province on Monday. Police intervened and blocked the march, arresting two protesters.

The workers are part of an earlier recruitment drive of thousands of workers into local governments on the promise of appointment to permanent posts, which after five years has not happened. Workers want permanent posts and a wage increase.

In another protest, Government Executive Union Officers members marched to the Ministry of Public Administration demanding a salary increase to compensate for increased living costs.

## Sri Lankan Railways workers protest low wages and increased cost of

## living

Hundreds of workers from the Alliance of Railway Trade Unions demonstrated at the Ratmalana junction, a suburb of Colombo, on Tuesday. Workers held placards saying, “lower fuel prices,” “give worker promotions,” “don’t pay electricity bills” and “unable to bear the burden of lives.” Demands included lowering utility costs and a 20,000 rupee (\$US61) allowance.

### **DP World Stevedores in Australia extend industrial action over pay and conditions**

Over 1,500 members of the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) employed at DP World container terminals in Brisbane, Sydney, Melbourne and Fremantle, have been holding rolling two-hour stoppages and work bans since October 6 to oppose cuts to pay and conditions in DP World’s proposed enterprise agreement.

On Monday, the MUA extended industrial action to include bans on loading and unloading containers on trucks until November 6. The trucking bans began on Friday in Sydney and will extend to all terminals on November 3.

Negotiations for a new agreement covering the four ports began in April. According to the union, the company wants to cut wages by up to 32 percent, undermine job security, and introduce a flexible rostering system that will require its members to work 65 Saturday or Sunday shifts a year, up from the current 52.

Workers want cost-of-living pay rises of at least 7.3 percent this year, which they say is the same granted to Patrick Stevedores employees in January. The union claims that DP World is already paying 10 percent less than other stevedores.

### **Southeast Queensland bus drivers maintain industrial action in pay dispute**

Close to 400 bus drivers in South East Queensland are refusing to collect fares indefinitely in their enterprise bargaining fight for a 7 percent pay rise, recruitment of additional drivers and improved driver safety.

The drivers are members of the Transport Workers Union (TWU) employed by bus operator Kinetic at its two subsidiaries, Surfside in the Gold Coast and Sunbus in the Sunshine Coast, as well as independent operator Clarks Logan City Bus Service.

The drivers held fare-free days in May, June and July, as well as 24-hour strikes in August and early this month, in which refuellers and cleaners also participated.

The TWU ended a series of half-day and one-day strikes in February after it struck a sell-out pay deal with Kinetic. Workers had not been consulted and opposed the deal, which provided paltry pay increases that took the drivers’ base rate to just \$30 an hour, and cleaners/refuellers to just above \$23 an hour. The workers are determined to maintain the struggle for their demands.

### **Educators at University of South Queensland strike for job security**

About 250 members of the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) from the University of South Queensland (UniSQ) walked out for 4 hours on Wednesday afternoon, in their dispute over the university’s proposed enterprise agreement. The action was sparked when management said it would end negotiations and take the dispute to the Fair Work Commission. The NTEU is demanding that the university withdraw its application to the commission and return to negotiations.

The NTEU claims it is fighting for job security but has accepted redundancies. It has demanded that a new agreement include redundancy to be a “last resort,” redundancy decisions to be based on “fair and objective” criteria and the right to independent review of what would otherwise be a unilateral management decision to terminate employment.

In an attempt to avoid further industrial action, which has been approved by the FWC, the union has asked members and supporters to send an email to the UniSQ Vice Chancellor to “let her know that you support the NTEU members taking a stand.”

### **Canberra Hospital radiographers take further industrial action**

Radiographers from Canberra Hospital Services’ Medical Imaging Department took a second round of industrial action on Friday in their long-running dispute over low pay and chronic understaffing. The 48 hours of industrial action by Community and Public Sector Union members follows a 24-hour overtime ban on October 11.

The union claimed that after nearly 18 months of negotiations, the Australian Capital Territory Labor government and Canberra Health Services have so far fallen short in delivering improvements to pay and conditions that would see allied health workers stay in Canberra. It alleged that the medical imaging service, as well as the broader health service in Canberra, has continued to lose staff as they are unable to compete with the pay and conditions of public health services in other jurisdictions.

Workers complained that it has reached a point where the government is completely reliant on staff doing a significant amount of overtime to meet patient needs. Radiation therapists and perfusionists at the hospital walked off the job on September 21, claiming that low wages had led to the loss of 19 skilled professionals out of a workforce of 50.

### **Metro Tasmania bus maintenance workers remain on strike for higher pay**

Bus mechanics at government-owned Metro Tasmania are maintaining their strike, begun on October 12, to protest wages that are well below industry standard. Media reported that the state Liberal government has paid outside contractors \$160,000 over the past month as strike breakers to keep the buses on the road. The Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) claimed that the contract mechanics are being paid industry rates.

The mechanics are demanding a \$10 per hour wage rise to bring them into parity with others in the industry and more training for apprentices. They rejected Metro’s nominal pay increase offer of 10.22 percent in the first year of its proposed agreement.

Workers are also demanding increased hiring to reverse a 30 percent staffing shortfall. Through successive funding cuts, the state government has created a shortage of mechanics and drivers that has persisted for several years. As a result, Metro has cut services on 180 bus routes in Hobart, Burnie and Launceston. The government has wiped its hands of

the issue, saying the dispute must be resolved by Metro alone.

### **United Workers Union claims “win” after accepting sub-inflation pay increases for dairy processing workers in Victoria**

Following united strike action last week by 1,400 dairy processing and warehouse workers at over a dozen sites across Victoria, the United Workers Union (UWU) is claiming victory after accepting nominal pay increase offers that are well below current inflation.

Before workers have had a chance to vote on the separate deals done with Saputo, Fonterra, Lactalis and Froneri (which owns Peters Ice Cream), all industrial action has been called off.

Last week, the UWU said it was advancing a demand for 5 percent per annum wage increases, but even this meagre sub-inflationary claim was immediately discarded by the union bureaucracy.

Saputo’s 560 workers at Cobram, Leongatha and Kiewa have been offered annual pay increases of 5 percent, 4 percent and 3 percent, while 320 workers at its three Allansford sites are offered pay increases of 4.25 to 5 percent in year one, 3.75 to 4 percent in year two, and 3 to 3.5 percent in year three.

Fonterra’s 300 workers at Cobden, Stanhope, and Darnum will vote on a deal with annual pay increases of 5, 4.5 and 4.5 percent, plus a \$500 bonus. Peters Ice Cream’s 200 workers have been offered pay increases of 5, 4.5 and 4.5 percent. The annualised September CPI rate is 5.4 percent.

The pay offers also do not compensate for several years of falling real wages, after the union agreed early in the COVID-19 pandemic to rollover existing agreements, even as company profits soared.

### **City of Whittlesea workers hold second strike over low pay offer**

Over 200 Australian Services Union (ASU) members from the City of Whittlesea, in the outer northern suburbs of Melbourne, walked off the job for three hours on Wednesday in opposition to a real-wage-slashing proposed enterprise agreement. The action followed a 24-hour strike on September 25.

The council has offered workers nominal pay increases of 3.3 percent in the first year, followed by 2.1 percent rises in each of the two following years, far below the rate of inflation.

The proposed agreement has been issued to workers, who have a week to read it before the ballot. The ASU is advocating a “no” vote, citing the low pay offer and the failure of management to accept its log of more than 50 other claims.

### **Arbitration bid in New Zealand laboratory workers’ pay dispute**

The New Zealand APEX union, which covers thousands of allied workers in the health sector, has halted an industrial campaign by medical laboratory workers while the employer seeks to take their pay dispute to arbitration.

Over 1,000 medical laboratory workers struck for 24 hours on September 20 at blood testing facilities run by privately-owned Awanui Laboratories. It was the fourth in a series of stoppages in the bitter pay

dispute, which saw a previous strike extend over four days in August.

At the last round of bargaining, Awanui reduced its offer from a 5 percent increase—a wage cut relative to inflation—to a flat \$3,500 on all salaries and wages, tantamount to a reduction from the previous offer.

Awanui has now formally requested that bargaining be referred to facilitation by the Employment Relations Authority (ERA). APEX told members in a newsletter it will oppose Awanui’s application and “continue all other efforts to resolve your bargaining.” The union did not announce any resumption of long-delayed strike action. Instead, it promises to “be in touch again” once the ERA decides on the company’s application.

Awanui is responsible for 70 percent of laboratory testing for the public health system. Technicians earn a starting salary of \$22.70 an hour, the official minimum wage, while scientists earn between \$25.65 and \$38.37. APEX has called for a 23.5 percent average increase.

The dispute occurs in parallel with actions by workers across the health sector. Telephone health line workers went on strike for 24 hours on October 6, their second stoppage in a month, after rejecting a pay offer from NZ Telehealth Services/Whakarongorau Aotearoa, a government-funded private organisation.



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