

# 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.*

## Malaysia: Commercial bank workers protest for work contracts

The National Union of Bank Employees (NUBE) announced on Sunday that its members will begin nationwide picketing over a breakdown in contract negotiations with commercial banks. A union spokesman accused the banks of engaging in union-busting and violating bank workers' rights to life and free association.

The NUBE and the Malayan Commercial Banks Association have been locked in a dispute over an agreement signed last year. One primary grievance is non-payment of the annual "festival" bonus amounting to a month's salary.

Workers accused the banks of denying them a work-life balance, job security, fair remuneration, and participation in union work. NUBE said workers are fighting for equal human rights for all and not to be treated as slaves by senior executives.

## India: Jharkhand rural workers in MNREGA program on indefinite strike

Around 5,000 workers employed in the rural development program MNREGA (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act) began an indefinite strike in Ranchi on July 22 against the government's failure to honour election promises. Workers are protesting overdue wages and demanding social security and stable jobs.

The strikers are mainly agricultural labourers who play a major role in rural development. They are guaranteed only 200 days annual employment.

## Punjab childcare workers protest delayed wages

Anganwadi (childcare) workers at Faridkot, in south-western Punjab, demonstrated outside the residence of the Social Security Minister on July 22. Workers demanded that wages be paid on time and protested the sub-standard food quality provided to Anganwadi centres. Protesters said they would hold a hunger strike until their demands were met.

## Karnataka: Hubli municipal sanitation workers strike

About 800 contract workers and 900 full time workers from the Hubli-Dharwad Municipal Corporation began an indefinite strike and demonstrated outside the corporation's headquarters on July 18. They were demanding direct salary payment and recruitment by the state government with statutory facilities entitled to civil servants.

Garbage in districts covered by the corporation is not being collected. Strikers have threatened to organise statewide protests if their demands are not granted.

## Pakistan: Salaried workers protest high taxes

About 50 workers organised by the Salaried Class Alliance (SCA) demonstrated at the Karachi Press Club on Tuesday to protest increased taxes on salaried workers in the government's 2024–25 budget. SCA complained that income tax has almost doubled for workers earning more than 50,000 rupees (\$US180).

Protesters alleged the government said it wants to generate an additional 70 billion rupees in taxes from this group of workers. One protester complained that around 60–70 percent of their income goes towards taxes and utilities.

## Nine Entertainment journalists strike after rejecting sub-inflation pay offer

Over 400 journalists employed by Nine Entertainment, which owns the *Sydney Morning Herald*, the *Age*, the *Australian Financial Review*, *Brisbane Times* and *Watoday*, walked off the job for five days at 11 a.m. yesterday in their dispute for higher pay and improved conditions. Negotiations for a new enterprise agreement with Nine, Australia's largest media conglomerate, have been underway for several months.

The striking Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA) members rallied outside Nine's offices in Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane and Perth. Journalists sent to cover the media outlet's Olympic Games coverage are participating in the strike. The walkout follows an almost unanimous vote by Nine's print journalists on July 19 to strike, after rejecting the company's 2.5 percent pay rise offer. The company also announced this month that it was axing 200 jobs, including up to 90 in its print division.

Union officials said management refused to budge on demands for "fair" pay and working conditions, including improvements to grade progression, adherence to the MEAA's freelance charter of rights, and

agreements on the use of Artificial Intelligence.

On Thursday, journalists rejected a revised offer from the company of 3.5 percent in the first year, 4 percent in the second year and 3 percent in the third year, declaring that it did not keep ahead of the rising cost of living.

The MEAA, which has overseen the axing of thousands of media jobs over the past two decades, has not opposed Nine's job destruction program or called for joint action with journalists at other media corporations facing similar cost-cutting attacks.

The Murdoch-owned News Corporation began slashing jobs this month in a \$65 million cost-cutting program at its Australian publications and Seven Media said late last month that it would eliminate 150 jobs and cut annual spending by \$100 million.

### **Tully Sugar mill workers in northern Queensland continue industrial action**

Over 170 production and maintenance workers at the Chinese-owned COFCO Tully Sugar mill in northern Queensland are maintaining protected industrial action begun in late May after rejecting the company's proposed enterprise agreement. The company offered a pay increase of 11.8 percent over a three-year agreement, equating to 3.9 percent annual increases.

The workers, who are members of the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union, Australian Workers Union and the Electrical Trades Union, were locked out for several days on June 5, after taking strike action.

They maintained industrial action and COFCO proposed a revised offer of 14.25 percent over three years, which 90 percent of workers rejected. The unions want a 21 percent pay rise over three years, claiming that wages are trailing inflation by 18.3 percent since their last pay increase.

### **Wilmar Sugar workers' pay dispute enters 13th week**

The pay dispute by over 700 workers at eight mills owned by Wilmar Sugar, in northeast Queensland, is in its 13th week since 90 percent of workers voted to take industrial action on April 26. Australian Workers Union, Australian Manufacturing Workers Union and Electrical Trades Union members began rolling stoppages and an overtime ban in early May after rejecting the company's proposed enterprise agreement.

The last pay rise was 2.25 percent in December 2022, well below the then annual CPI (consumer price index) rate of 7.8 percent. Wilmar has offered a pay rise of 14.25 percent over 4 years and a sign on bonus of \$1,500. The unions are demanding a 22 percent pay rise over four years to compensate for previous sub-inflation pay increases.

Wilmar has made several threats to lock out workers and on July 18 closed all its mills for 16 hours in response to a one-hour strike by workers, drawing an angry response from local cane growers who claimed Wilmar's action cost them around \$2.3 million.

### **Queensland's Gold-Tweed Coast bus workers fight for pay rise at Kinetic**

Many bus drivers and cleaners/refuellers employed by global bus conglomerate Kinetic on the Gold and Tweed Coasts, Australia's sixth biggest urban area, have been refusing to operate ticketing machines for more than six months, fighting for a wage increase amid the worsening cost-of-living crisis.

Disenchanted with sellouts by the Transport Workers Union (TWU), these workers are now represented by an officially-registered Independent Bargaining Representative group.

Kinetic, which profits from government contracts, has accepted an offer from the Queensland state Labor government to raise drivers' base pay to \$35 an hour, which is still at poverty level. But the company has refused to pass on the money, claiming it has not received it yet.

Kinetic workers are still paying the price for a TWU betrayal. In February 2023, without holding a vote, the TWU called off a series of half-day and one-day strikes by the bus workers over low pay, unsafe conditions and a lack of facilities.

The union signed a memorandum of understanding with the company that took drivers' base rate to just \$30 an hour, and cleaners/refuellers to just above \$23 an hour—despite workers having voted by 77 percent to reject that in a company ballot.

The Labor Party-aligned TWU bureaucrats remain anxious to prevent any militant stand by the Gold and Tweed Coast workers from spreading to other Kinetic operations across the country and internationally.

### **Federal Court attempts to ban building workers' picket at Brisbane's Cross River Rail site**

Building contractor CBD was successful on July 18 in obtaining a Federal Court order that bars striking Construction Forestry Maritime and Energy Union (CFMEU) members at Brisbane's Cross River Rail construction sites from maintaining their pickets within 15 metres of entrances to the site. Workers were also directed to not photograph or record any person or vehicle entering or exiting any of the 16 building site entrances. CFMEU accepted the ruling but is maintaining a picket outside the 15-metre zone.

About 150 CFMEU members walked off the job on July 16 as part of an ongoing campaign for higher pay and improved safety in a new work agreement. Negotiations between the CFMEU and CPB began early this year.

Workers want a heat policy and a subcontractors' clause to improve job security, the inclusion of traffic controllers and cleaners in the agreement and industry-standard rostered days off. The CFMEU also wants equal pay and conditions for the 2,500 subcontracted workers at all the sites.

Heat stress is an ongoing concern for workers. Daniel Sa'u, a 29-year-old labour hire worker, allegedly died of heat stress at the site in late December. The CFMEU claims that 25 workers have been hospitalised due to heat stress since Christmas.

### **Victorian TAFE teachers strike again for pay rise and lower workloads**

Following a one-hour strike on June 12, Technical and Further Education (TAFE) teachers at 12 standalone TAFE colleges in Victoria stopped work again for one hour on Wednesday to demand higher pay and reduced workloads. The Australian Education Union (AEU) said that if the state Labor government fails to make a decent pay offer teachers

would walk out for 24 hours on August 21.

The AEU has been in enterprise agreement negotiations with the state Labor government for two years. Teachers want excess workloads addressed, class assessment to count as teaching time, education qualifications recognised, classifications fixed, and wage parity with similarly qualified teachers at state-funded schools. The union claims that TAFE teachers are paid \$7,742 a year or 7 percent less than similarly experienced teachers. They also want an end to chronic understaffing, unpaid and excessive overtime and high teacher turnover.

### **South Australia: Pernod Ricard winery workers strike for pay rise and job security**

Over 120 workers from global winemaker Pernod Ricard in regional South Australia stopped work for four hours on Wednesday in opposition to the company's proposed enterprise agreement. The United Workers Union (UWU) accused Pernod Ricard of trying to force a short-term, low-wage deal on workers after it signed an agreement to sell its wine brands and assets across Australia and New Zealand to Accolade Wines.

UWU claimed that over the last three 3 years the CPI (consumer price index) has gone up almost 16 percent and Pernod Ricard workers' wages have gone up a mere 7 percent. Workers are concerned about the future of their jobs and want their work agreement to include job security and a pay increase that compensates for inflation. Workers have endorsed a 24-hour stoppage for Tuesday next week.

Pernod Ricard recorded a global net profit of \$5.6 billion in 2023, while the global CEO pocketed \$3.7 million in 2022.

### **Western Australian public hospital anaesthetic technicians take action for pay rise**

Public hospital anaesthetic technicians from seven major hospitals in Western Australia's capital Perth, held stop work meetings this week for a "fair pay deal and pay structure" to support the retention of anaesthetic technicians in public hospitals. The workers are members of the Health Services Union (HSU).

The HSU, in late June, rejected the state Labor government's pay rise offer of 4.75 percent in the first year and 3.5 percent in the second year, saying the offer did not go far enough to ensure all its public sector members receive a real pay rise.

### **Ramsay Health Care nurses in New South Wales strike again**

New South Wales Nurses and Midwives Association (NSWNMA) members at private hospitals of Ramsay Health Care walked out for three hours on Tuesday in their struggle for higher pay and safe staffing levels in a new enterprise agreement. The strike was in addition to NSWNMA's 2,600 members at Ramsay's 70 NSW hospitals wearing union badges and distributing leaflets to patients and visitors.

The union has allowed negotiations for the new agreement to drag on since March last year. Nurses rejected Ramsay's pay offer of 11 percent over a three-year agreement, saying they are currently paid up to 14 percent less than their Queensland counterparts and want an improved

offer. The nurses' last pay rise was only 2.4 percent in July 2022 when the consumer price index rate was 6.1 percent.

They want an 18 percent pay increase over three years and improvements to conditions, including increases to paid parental and personal leave entitlements, protection of existing conditions and improved staff rostering to reduce workload.

### **Bolton Clark aged care workers in Victoria strike for pay rise**

Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation (ANMF) members at Bolton Clark aged care facilities in Victoria walked off the job for two hours on Monday and protested outside the company's headquarters in Melbourne. Bolton Clark had earlier threatened to lock out workers taking strike action.

The ANMF, covering about 1,700 members at Bolton Clarke's 22 residential aged care facilities and at-home nursing program, Homeless Persons Nursing Program and maternal and child health line, have dragged out enterprise agreement negotiations for over 18 months.

Bolton Clark offered a one-year agreement with a sub-inflation two percent pay increase and a lower pay rate scale for new employees.

The union wants wages and allowances increased, backdated from 30 June 2024, and in line with the Victorian public health sector and that this be the base rate of pay. It also wants a further 4 percent increase on June 30 for each year of the agreement.

### **Sydney light-rail workers strike again for pay increase**

Rail Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) members, employed by commuter transport contractor Transdev, which operates Sydney's light-rail network, began a week of stoppages on Monday as part of their campaign for a pay rise. Workers stopped work for three hours each day during the morning and afternoon commuter peak hours.

The action followed a 24-hour stoppage on June 12 after rejecting Transdev's pay offer of an 18 percent pay increase in a four-year agreement—only 4.5 percent annually. Workers said the offer did not compensate for huge increases in the cost of living and want 23 percent over four years, plus an additional five-days sick leave. An RTBU spokesman told a Sydney radio station, however, that the union was willing to negotiate a deal if Transdev made a revised pay offer of 20 percent.

### **Ampol aviation refuellers at Sydney Airport strike for pay rise and permanent jobs**

Ampol aviation refuellers at Sydney Airport plan to stop work for two hours on each three shifts on July 31 as part of their fight for improved wages and permanent jobs in a new work agreement.

After 14 rounds of negotiations over six months between the Transport Workers Union and Ampol failed to reach agreement, workers on July 5 voted to take industrial action that approved an overtime ban and strikes of 4, 8, 24 hours and 7 days.

The 50 workers want comparable pay to Ampol's competitors, guaranteed part-time hours and a preference for full-time jobs. Ampol

provides only 24 full-time positions out of 68 employees. The workers have received only a 3.5 percent pay increase over the last three years, a real pay cut.

### **New Zealand aged care workers protest looming cuts**

Workers and residents at a major aged care facility in New Zealand's capital Wellington protested and picketed the Village at the Park retirement home in the suburb of Berhampore on July 18. About 150 people took part in the protest.

Arvida, which has 35 such facilities across the country, is proposing to cut more than 400 hours a week from care workers, nurses, and activity coordinators. An E T? union spokesperson said they were planning to cut 54 hours from the roster of registered nurses and more than 350 care hours from remaining staff.

Arvida had run a trial at five of their sites with the model they are proposing to implement at Village at the Park, claiming they can make the cuts with no reduction in safety, well-being or quality of life for their residents.

While declaring that the union "disagrees," E T? said Arvida needs to provide "more information on why the cuts were necessary." The union wants to "work with Arvida" to ensure they are done in a way that "does not impact residents' care" and is "humane for staff."

That is, the unions will not oppose the restructuring but will help impose it. The Village at the Park director said: "We are currently engaging with our team, the unions and our residents on some proposed changes to the way we structure our team...We agree with E T? and the NZNO [NZ Nurses' Organisation] that there are funding challenges for the aged care sector which we are having to work through."



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