

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.

Taiwanese public preschool educators demand improved benefits and lower workloads

Childcare workers from public preschools gathered at Liberty Square and marched to the Ministry of Education building in Taipei last Saturday to demand equal benefits as preschool teachers. They carried signs saying, “Educators want equal rights” and “No discrimination, benefits should be the same.” About 1,500 of the nation’s 7,000 public preschool educators attended the rally.

Protesters complained that although they are forced to take on extra duties and work overtime as teachers, they are not eligible for performance-based bonuses or the National Travel Card subsidy for civil servants. A Taiwan Early Childhood Education Union spokesperson said their members are asked to work extra hours during summer and winter vacations and after school.

India: National Health Mission workers in Haryana remain on strike

Nearly 14,000 National Health Mission (NHM) contract nurses in Haryana state have been on strike since July 26 over several demands including higher wages and permanent jobs. The nurses, who are mostly women, are holding sit-down protests in several cities, including Sirsa and Bhiwani. In Sirsa protesters climbed a water tank and refused to come down until demands were met.

The strike has impacted on infant care, gynaecology, TB, HIV and ambulance operations. Staff nurses as well as ambulance drivers and operators are involved in the strike. The NHM Karmachari Sanjha Morcha accused successive centre governments of ignoring their demand for permanent jobs.

Karnataka IT workers protest proposed 14-hour workday

About 900 Information Technology (IT) and Information Technology Enabled Services (ITes) workers protested at Freedom Park in Bangalore last Saturday to oppose the increased working hours bill proposed by the Karnataka government.

Under the proposed amendment to the Karnataka Shops and

Commercial Establishment Act an employee working in the IT/ITes sector may be required or allowed to work for more than 12 hours in a day, but not exceeding 125 hours in three continuous months. The draft amendment bill was put on hold last month following mass opposition.

A spokesman from the Karnataka State IT/ITes Employees Union (KITU) told media that workers were concerned they would lose their work-life balance if this law came into force. A memorandum of their opposition to the bill was handed to the labour commissioner.

Uttar Pradesh sanitation workers strike for welfare scheme

Over 2,000 sanitation workers employed by the New Okhla Industrial Development Authority in Noida, Uttar Pradesh have been holding a sit-down protest since Tuesday for inclusion in the Employee State Insurance (ESI) and other welfare facilities.

The authority absurdly claimed that the workers, who are paid only 12,000 rupees (\$US250) a month, do not qualify for ESI because their wages are too high. Workers are also demanding that their jobs be given to their children after their retirement.

While there are 10,000 sanitation workers in Noida, most are on contracts with only a handful of permanent employees. Over 4,500 sanitation workers are members of the Swachtha Karmachari Union.

Pakistan: Khyber Pakhtunkhwa teachers protest pension cuts

Hundreds of Young Teachers Association (YTA) members demonstrated in several districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa on Tuesday against abolition of their pensions and ad hoc recruitment in the education department. The YTA, which represents 34,000 teachers, said it would resist the government’s plan to force them into the contributory pension (CP) fund. Teachers threatened to stage a sit-down protest outside the chief minister’s house in DI Khan if their demands are not accepted by August 11.

Submarine maintenance workers in South Australia escalate industrial action

About 350 workers from the government-owned ASC submarine maintenance and sustainment facility at the Osborn Naval Shipyard in Adelaide began a four-day strike on Wednesday as part of a long-running

campaign for a new work agreement. The Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU), Australian Workers Union and the Electrical Trades Union have been trying to negotiate a deal with ASC since November.

The unions called limited industrial action, beginning on May 6, which included work bans and one-hour rolling stoppages each morning that they claim has added months of delays to maintenance work on two of Australia's six Collins Class submarines.

The highly skilled workers want pay parity with their colleagues in Perth, Western Australia who do submarine repair and maintenance but are paid 17 percent more. ASC has only offered a 6.75 percent pay rise.

The AMWU claimed that ASC CEO Stuart Whitley, who recently received a 31 percent pay increase, has refused to negotiate on pay parity. His pay rise lifted his salary to \$1,084,725 a year.

Pernod Ricard winery workers in South Australia begin 24-hour rolling strikes

More than 120 members of the United Workers Union (UWU) employed by the global winemaker Pernod Ricard in regional South Australia began 24-hour rolling stoppages on Wednesday at the company's Rowland Flat winery. The action follows strikes of four hours and 24 hours in the previous two weeks for an improved pay offer in the company's proposed enterprise agreement.

The UWU accused the company of trying to force a short-term, low-wage deal on members after it signed an agreement to sell its wine brands and assets in Australia, New Zealand and Spain to Accolade Wines. Pernod Ricard's wine portfolio includes seven well-known Australian wineries.

The UWU claimed that over the past three years the CPI (consumer price index) has gone up almost 16 percent, while Pernod Ricard workers' wages have gone up a mere 7 percent. Workers said they will maintain the rolling stoppages until Pernod Ricard offers an agreement that includes job security and a pay increase that compensates for inflation.

Essential Energy electricians in New South Wales walk off

Electrical Trades Union (ETU) members at over 20 Essential Energy depots in regional New South Wales walked off the job on Thursday and rallied outside their depots for better pay and conditions in a new enterprise agreement. Essential Energy is a state-owned power utility that builds and operates electricity services to over 1,500 regional, rural and remote communities.

The ETU covers over 1,800 Essential Energy workers who have rejected the company's pay offer. Over 90 percent of union members in a ballot on July 29 approved taking protected industrial action.

Endeavour Energy workers in New South Wales strike again for higher pay offer

Hundreds of Electrical Trades Union (ETU) members from Endeavour Energy walked off the job and rallied outside the company's headquarters in Parramatta on Thursday. The ETU has dragged out negotiations since

October, restricting industrial action to only a 24-hour strike in February and June and imposition of low-level work bans.

Endeavour's last offer, rejected by workers in March, included a \$1,000 sign-on bonus, a 5.25 percent pay rise from July this year and annual 3.25 percent increases, or the consumer price index rate, whichever is the greater, in 2025 and 2026.

The ETU, which covers over 800 Endeavour workers, wants a yearly 8 percent pay rise over three years to compensate for previous sub-inflation pay increases. It claimed that wages at Endeavour have only increased by 10.5 percent since 2019. It said there are also over 60 outstanding claims that are subject to ongoing negotiations.

Endeavour Energy, a partnership between a consortium led by Macquarie Infrastructure and Real Assets and the NSW government, operates the electrical distribution network for Greater Western Sydney and the Illawarra area, south of Sydney.

Tas IVF hospital nurses in Hobart reject low pay offer

Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation (ANMF) members at the Tas IVF Hobart Specialist Day Hospital stopped work briefly on Tuesday to demand an improved pay offer. The 16 ANMF members voted on July 24 for industrial action after rejecting the company's sub-inflation pay offer.

Tas IVF offered annual pay increases of 3.3–3.4 percent (depending on classification). Other issues nurses want resolved include not being paid for time spent changing into scrubs and preparing for work, leave for professional development and improved staffing decisions by management.

The ANMF has threatened to escalate industrial action if management fails to make an improved offer within two weeks.

Bolton Clark aged care workers in Victoria strike again for pay rise

As part of a long-running pay dispute, Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation (ANMF) members at Bolton Clark aged care facilities at Glendale and Rosebrook, Victoria, walked off the job for two hours on August 2 and rallied outside their facilities.

The action followed a two-hour state-wide stoppage on July 22, on top of work bans put in place on July 15. Workers said they intend to hold rolling two-hour stop work rallies every Friday during August and September.

The ANMF, covering about 1,700 members at Bolton Clark'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.

The company's initial zero percent pay rise offer in a one-year agreement was overwhelmingly rejected by workers. It then increased it to a sub-inflation 2 percent for some of the lowest rates in Victoria, along with a new lower pay rate for new employees.

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

Bolton Clark is a Queensland-based company formed in 2016 when RSL Care in Queensland united with Victoria's Royal District Nursing Service and then in 2022 took over 22 Allity and McKenzie nursing

homes in Victoria.

Tasmanian power distribution workers to strike for pay rise

More than 300 electrical trades workers at the state-owned power distributor TasNetworks have voted to take protected industrial action in their dispute for an improved pay offer. They plan to strike on August 14.

TasNetworks' pay rise offer was 7 percent in the first year and a one-off payment of \$2,000 with years two and three rises linked to the consumer price index (CPI) rate, uncapped.

The Communications, Electrical and Plumbing Union (CEPU) says the workers are being paid on average 30 percent less than other workers doing the same work on the Australian mainland and in some cases 50 percent less. Workers want wage equity with mainland workers.

TasNetworks manages Tasmania's electricity transmission and distribution network and owns and operates a telecommunications network throughout the state.

Strike at Tasmania's Saputo dairy food plant enters ninth week

Twenty-four maintenance workers employed at Saputo's dairy processing factory in Bernie have been on strike for over nine weeks for higher pay. The plant is one of Australia's largest producers of specialty cheese.

Communications Electrical Plumbing Union and Australian Manufacturing Workers' Union members are fighting for the same pay as Saputo's mainland workers. The unions claimed that Saputo's Tasmanian maintenance workers are earning 23.5 percent less than Saputo's Victorian workers for doing the same job.

The company's last pay offer was for a 9.5 percent rise in the first year which was well below the 21 percent increase workers want. The disparity for Tasmanian workers is widespread, with wages averaging \$220 less per week than the mainland states.

Saputo has been using scab labour to maintain production. Although other unions across Australia claim solidarity with the Saputo workers, they have made no call for united industrial action. Support has been limited to appeals to state politicians and for a public boycott of Saputo products. A \$100,000 strike fund has been set up, which even if fully funded would provide only a little over \$500 a week for each striker.

New South Wales child protection workers strike again over staff shortages

Child protection caseworkers stopped work and protested outside the DCJ Orange Community Services Centre in Orange on Wednesday over chronic staff shortages in childcare across the state. It followed state-wide walkouts by 2,000 caseworkers in May and July over the issue.

The Public Service Association (PSA), which covers the largest group of workers, claimed that only one in five children reported to Child Protection Services as at risk of serious harm are being seen by a caseworker. In some parts of the state only 13 percent of children are seen due to lack of staff.

The association said one in ten caseworker positions are unfilled in

NSW, but the vacancy rate on any given day is as high as one in five. PSA wants the state Labor government to approve an "immediate and substantial pay rise" to retain staff and increase recruitment.

Workers say the department needs an additional 500 caseworkers and want foster care placed back in the public sector instead of being outsourced to NGOs and charity organisations. The PSA wants wages lifted from an average starting rate of \$76,000 a year to \$88,000, which the union claims is the going rate in the private sector.

New Zealand supermarket workers demand higher pay and staffing

Nearly 10,000 Woolworths supermarket workers voted for industrial action this week after pay and staffing negotiations failed. While the First Union boasts this is a "strike," the union is in fact ensuring that the workers stay on the job.

First Union is seeking the so-called "Living Wage" as its bargaining standard, which is \$26 per hour, with an increase to \$27.80 on September 1. Woolworths is offering a 6.6 percent increase, taking the current start rate from \$24.93 to about \$26.60. Workers have rejected the offer while also protesting low staffing levels.

Union members' actions include non-compliance with company media and social media policies, wearing stickers saying "underpaid, undervalued, understaffed" and, in ten stores, handing out flyers directly to customers. A union official described the tactics as designed "to be inclusive and solidarity-building" while posturing this is "ahead of any potentially more disruptive actions."

Michelle McKenzie, a supervisor at Woolworths in Christchurch, told *Stuff*: "A lot of our team are really struggling week-to-week with the rising cost of living, and if you get an unexpected dentist's bill or car issues, plenty of Woolworths workers would be at a total loss. We simply don't get paid enough to put aside any money for a rainy day—many of us live week to week."

Australian-owned Woolworths is currently undergoing an estimated \$400 million rebrand. Revenue grew by \$344m (4.55 percent) in the year to June 2023 and the company has extracted more than \$1 billion in dividends for shareholders over the last five years.

Possible strike action at University of the South Pacific

Staff at the Fiji headquarters of the University of the South Pacific (USP) are reportedly due to vote on strike action over the sacking of a union leader by the university's chief executive.

The Association of the USP (AUSPS) and the USP Staff Union (USPSU) claim that USP vice-chancellor and president Pal Ahluwalia "launched a vicious attack on the staff unions and freedom of speech" after he terminated the employment contract of AUSPS president Dr Tamara Osborne-Naikatini in July.

The academic, a biology lecturer, had spoken to *Islands Business* about the "flawed process" by which Ahluwalia was offered a two-year renewal to his contract. Osborne-Naikatini was the staff representative on the USP senate's review committee.

The unions were in dispute with the management earlier this year over salaries. They had threatened to take strike action if the executive team failed to meet their demands, but the unions withdrew their strike action after reaching a settlement.

In 2019, Ahluwalia was deported from Fiji in a midnight raid by police

and immigration officials, after he fell out with the previous Bainimarama administration for exposing allegations of corruption and financial mismanagement at the regional university.



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