

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.

South Korean shipbuilding workers strike for better pay and conditions

South Korean shipbuilding workers are taking strike action across seven shipyards to demand improved wages and bonuses that match company profits and compensate for the increasing cost of living. Workers began taking strikes of up to five hours on August 28.

Shipyards affected are HD Hyundai Heavy Industries, HD Hyundai Samho, Hanwha Ocean, HSG Sungdong, K Shipbuilding, HD Hyundai Mipo and Samsung Heavy Industries.

On Tuesday, union members at HD Hyundai Heavy Industries (HD HHI) held a four-hour strike after rejecting a pay offer which the company claimed was the industry's highest wage increase. The offer put forward on September 25 included a basic wage increase of 122,500 won (US\$91) per month, a one-off 4 million won (US\$2,972) bonus plus a 300,000 won (US\$223) gift certificate, and the introduction of a new performance bonus for zero major accidents.

The HD HHI union, which is affiliate with the Korean Metal Workers' Union (KMWU), has not changed its demands put forward at the end of April. Those were for a basic monthly wage increase of 159,800 won (US\$119), changes to the performance bonus calculation from 7.5 percent to 5 percent of the operating profit denominator and an adjustment to the longevity bonus to an increase of 10,000 won (US\$7.43) per year of service. The total pay rise demand is 72,300 won (\$54) more than the company's offer.

Meanwhile, unions at the other major shipbuilding companies, except for Samsung Heavy Industries which has concluded its negotiations, are continuing with industrial action. Workers at Daewoo Shipbuilding held a four-hour strike on Monday and K Shipbuilding struck on Tuesday. Unions under the Union of Shipbuilding Industries at HD HHI, HD Hyundai Mipo, HD Hyundai Samho, Hanwha Ocean, and K Shipbuilding held a joint strike on Thursday.

South Korea: Busan Subway Union threatens to strike

On Tuesday, the Busan Subway Union announced plans to initiate an indefinite strike beginning Friday if negotiations for pay rises and reduced workloads did not reach a resolution by then. There have been 15 meetings with management since negotiations began in June.

The union is demanding a 4.8 percent wage increase and the hiring of 500 additional safety personnel. Management has countered with a 1.5 percent wage increase offer and claims the staffing demands cannot be met due to financial constraints.

India: Sacked Maruti Suzuki factory workers start hunger protest

Victimised Maruti Suzuki workers, who are picketing 200 metres from the Manesar auto assembly plant in Haryana, began a hunger protest on October 10. The workers, accompanied by their families and children, are demanding reinstatement at the plant.

On September 19, 117 sacked workers from the plant renewed their struggle to get their jobs back. About 545 permanent workers and 1,800 contract workers were sacked during a wage dispute in 2012.

The 117 sacked workers were framed for the murder of Awanish Dev, a senior HR manager, who was in fact sympathetic towards workers. Part of the factory was damaged by fire and the protesting workers were attacked by company-sponsored thugs.

Thirteen workers were sentenced to life imprisonment following frameup charges orchestrated by Suzuki Corporation management, the police and judicial authorities, with the support of the Congress Party and the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party.

The workers are organised by the Maruti Suzuki Struggle Committee.

West Bengal Rohini Tea Estate workers demand higher bonus

Tea Plantation workers from the Rohini Tea Estate in West Bengal held a protest and road block on October 3 to demand a 20 percent bonus, in opposition to the government's announced 16 percent. Workers at eight hill plantations in the Darjeeling region have launched a joint movement of protest against the government's lower percentage bonus.

Braving rain and a police crackdown, workers sat down on the national highways, sheltering under umbrellas. They condemned the government-affiliated unions for not participating in the protest.

Workers at government mines and quarries in Gujarat on strike

Around 10,000 workers in 1,600 government quarries and mines in Vadodara, central Gujarat, went on an indefinite strike October 1. Thousands of dump trucks are absent from the roads and the whole mining industry in the state has come to a halt. Workers are demanding that the government open all quarries it previously closed and resolve long-pending grievances.

Pakistan: Public school teachers protest privatisation

Public school teachers across Punjab province took to the streets on

“World Teachers’ Day” (October 5), declaring it a “black day.” They demanded the reversal of privatisation policies in the education sector and the restoration of pension benefits. Demonstrations were held in Lodhran, Okara, Faisalabad and Sahiwal, where teachers condemned the outsourcing of public schools to NGOs and other government policies they believe are detrimental to the education system and their rights.

Teachers from all districts marched through the streets and held sit-down protests in front of press clubs. Protesters blocked main roads and chanted slogans against the government. They wore black armbands and vowed to continue their protests until the government restores the earlier pension policy and halts the privatisation process.

On Monday, All Primary Teachers Association (APTA) members took to the streets across Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province to protest the delay in school “upgradation,” privatisation plans and changes to pension rules.

In Peshawar, protesters gathered outside the press club where an APTA spokesperson said teachers were unable to keep up with the soaring cost of living. He threatened that 100,000 teachers would boycott their duties and 26,000 primary schools would be shut, if the government does not accept their demands by the end of October.

Bangladesh: Garment factory workers continue protests over multiple demands

On Monday, workers from garment factories in the Ashulia, Gazipur and Savar industrial belt staged demonstrations, blocking roads and closing nine factories. They were demanding higher wages and attendance bonuses.

Workers from Radial International in Gazipur resumed demonstrations and blocked the Chandra-Nabinagar road for several hours after factory authorities reneged on an agreement to meet their demands, including an increase in the attendance bonus.

Garment workers at Narayanganj in Dhaka held a hunger protest demanding factory owners implement 18 demands agreed to on September 24 by the trade unions, factory owners and the government. Workers from Nemcon Design and Abanti Colour Tex demanded the payment of wages, which have not been paid for the past three months.

According to trade union officials, at least 20 factories had fired over 2,000 workers in the 15 days prior to Monday.

On October 5, hundreds of garment workers at factories in Gazipur, along with unemployed workers seeking jobs, protested over multiple demands. Concerned that the dispute would spread to other workplaces, 25 Gazipur garment factories were closed by their owners.

Dhaka food and beverage workers protest over wages and conditions

Hundreds of workers from Akij Food and Beverage Limited staged a demonstration on Monday, in front of their factory at Dhamrai, on the outskirts of Bangladesh’s capital Dhaka. They presented nine demands, including a salary increase. They blocked the Aricha-bound side of the Dhaka-Aricha Highway creating a two-kilometre-long gridlock for about 30 minutes, chanting slogans like “our demands must be met” and “we do not accept wage discrimination.”

Among their key demands were a monthly salary of 15,000 taka (\$US125.50), Eid festival bonus equal to half their monthly salary and a share in company dividends. Other claims were for fair and regular duty assignments, permanent employment based on work performance,

compensation for injuries sustained at the workplace, improved security in all departments and a weekly day off.

Expressing frustration over social conditions, one female worker said: “I earn 7,000 taka and it’s not enough. I can’t support my family. I’ve repeatedly asked for a raise but nothing has changed. There’s no regular duty and no holidays. I’ve been working here for five years, but it’s been tough. That’s why we’re protesting today. If our demands aren’t met, we will continue the protest.”

Industrial police, Ansar (a paramilitary force) and the army were deployed in front of the factory.

Qube workers at Australia’s major ports continue strike action for pay rise

Continuing industrial action that began September 13, over 380 members of the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) at Qube’s bulk-handling facilities in Melbourne, Port Kembla, Darwin and Brisbane began seven days of industrial action on Friday in their fight for a pay rise.

MUA members are banning night shifts, shift extensions, work on ships for the first 8 hours once alongside, shifts longer than 8 hours, start times for shifts other than 7 a.m., 3 p.m. and 11 p.m. Workers will also hold work stoppages of 1, 4, 8, 24 and 48 hours.

Qube has been trying to renegotiate 19 enterprise agreements around Australia with its stevedoring workers. Enterprise agreement negotiations started last October. Workers voted unanimously in August to approve taking industrial action.

MUA members have rejected Qube’s pay rise offer of 5 percent over each of the first two years of a new agreement, and 4 percent in each of the two subsequent years, as well as back pay for agreements concluded by September 30. The MUA says its members’ wages have declined by 14 percent in real terms while Qube profits have risen by 148 percent over the duration of the last enterprise agreement.

SAE University College educators across Australia hold third strike for pay rise

National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) members at SAE University College campuses across Australia walked off the job for five hours on October 1 after rejecting management’s latest pay offer in its proposed enterprise agreement. The strike affected classes in Perth, Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane, Adelaide and Byron Bay.

SAE is a national creative media industries educational institute specialising in video, audio, artificial intelligence and game design. Educators walked off the job twice in July after rejecting management’s “insulting” pay offer of a meagre \$0.01 per hour above the minimum award rate. SAE’s latest pay rise offer was just 1.1 percent above the minimum award rate.

As well as a better pay offer, staff want a reasonable workload. They said that as part of a restructure, many teachers found themselves teaching extra subjects, but not being paid for the additional workload that came with it. Management has refused to budge on maximum class sizes and teaching caps designed to reduce workloads. Negotiations for the new agreement have been ongoing for two years.

Workers have stepped up work bans that include an indefinite stop to using online systems to mark attendance and refusal to use internal communications platform Slack for a week.

Brisbane's Cross River Rail construction project workers reject second pay offer during 13-week strike

Some 150 striking Construction Forestry Maritime and Energy Union (CFMEU) members at Brisbane's Cross River Rail construction site have rejected their employer's latest proposed enterprise agreement for the second time in three weeks. CFMEU members, who are directly employed by contractor CBD, walked off the job on July 16 as part of their campaign for higher pay and improved safety in a new agreement.

The CFMEU also wants equal pay and conditions for the 2,500 subcontracted workers at the project's 16 sites. Other demands are for a heat policy, the inclusion of traffic controllers and cleaners in the agreement, and industry-standard rostered days off.

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 at various Brisbane construction sites have been hospitalised since December due to heat stress.

Workers accused CBD of attempting to use a bribe of a \$5,000 sign-on bonus in its latest offer to encourage them to trade away safety and conditions. The CFMEU claimed that the offer did not contain many of the workers' log of claims, including training programs, an effective heat policy, and a "same job same pay" clause covering contractors.

Sydney Metro maintenance workers strike for pay parity

Some 34 members of the Electrical Trades Union and Australian Manufacturing Workers Union employed by subcontractor Alstom on the Sydney Metro rail commuter network walked off the job on October 4 and rallied outside Tallawong Station to demand pay parity with their colleagues employed directly by Metro Trains Sydney. The unions claim that Alstom workers are paid \$10 an hour less but are doing the same job.

The maintenance workers first stopped work on August 27 after six months of negotiations for a new enterprise agreement. Workers are also opposing a proposed 24-hour roster cycle, which they say threatens their time with family and friends on weekends. Workers have put in place bans on pre-departure checks, overtime, and the shunting or driving of rolling stock.

Canberra public hospital doctors strike over pay and workload

Over 300 Australian Capital Territory (ACT) hospital doctors stopped work for one hour on October 3 in a dispute with the territory's Labor-Greens government over pay and workload. The stoppage followed work bans put in place on September 23 that include not taking phone calls outside of rostered hours and not attending administrative meetings, among other limited measures.

The Australian Salaried Medical Officers Federation (ASMOF) said ACT doctors' pay has dropped from being among the highest 25 percent in Australia to the second lowest during three years of negotiations, and that the government's 2 percent annual wage increase offer did not match the rising cost of living.

Doctors complained that uncompetitive working conditions and pay had contributed to staff shortages and excessive workloads. An ASMOF spokesperson claimed that ACT doctors are up to 10 percent worse off compared with their interstate colleagues.

Essential Energy electricians in New South Wales hold statewide strike

As part of ongoing industrial action that began on August 8, over 1,800 Electrical Trades Union (ETU) members from 92 Essential Energy depots across New South Wales walked off the job on October 3 and rallied in front of their depots demanding an improved pay offer in the company's proposed enterprise agreement. Workers are holding rolling one-hour stoppages on top of bans on switching for maintenance work, unlocking switch stations and electrical cabinets and several other measures.

Essential Energy is a state-owned power utility that builds and operates electricity services for over 1,500 NSW regional, rural and remote communities.

Workers last week rejected the company's latest pay offer, which included a 15 percent pay rise over three years, a 1.0 percent increase to superannuation and an upfront payment of \$5,000. They want a 26 percent pay increase over the three-year agreement, plus a 1.5 percent rise in superannuation. The union has also requested a \$4.50 per hour employee retention allowance.

The ETU claimed that wages at Essential Energy have gone backwards by 8 percent since 2016. The last union-negotiated pay rise was just 2.5 percent in July 2023, when the consumer price index was 6.6 percent.

Industrial action by Victoria University educators enters seventh week

About 370 National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) members at the Victoria University (VU), with campuses in Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane, commenced another round of work bans this week in their struggle for a long overdue pay increase and reduced workload. The measures include bans on performing extra duties, the use of on-line systems, student consultation and meeting with managers, as well as a one-day teaching ban on Thursday.

The union called off a two-week teaching ban due to commence on October 2, after management made an application to the Fair Work Commission to have industrial action suspended, claiming the teaching ban would endanger the welfare of students.

NTEU members have been without an enterprise agreement for more than two years. The NTEU says VU's teaching model is super-exploitative, driving educators to work 50-hour weeks which are impacting health and safety. Workers want an end to the double-block teaching model, reduced academic workloads, flexible hours and working-from-home provisions, job security and a wage rise in line with the cost of living.

Monash University educators rally for pay rise and job security

National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) members from Monash

University in Melbourne held a midday rally on campus on Monday, in their long-running dispute over the university's proposed enterprise agreement. Workers demanded a pay rise, job security for casuals and a maximum 20:1 student-teacher ratio. Despite NTEU members showing their enthusiasm to fight when they walked out for 24 hours in March, the union has allowed negotiations to drag on for nearly two years.

The current NTEU-negotiated enterprise agreement covering most workers expired in June 2022, with a final pay increase of only 1 percent. In that year, inflation peaked at around 7 percent, meaning that any future pay increase will need to compensate for what was a real 6 percent pay cut.

However, the NTEU is demanding a pay increase of just 4.5 percent for this year. Other demands are for improved job security, including conversion for fixed-term staff, 600 new ongoing teaching positions, a cap on academic workloads and the right to work from home. The union claimed that workloads are out of control and more than half of the staff are employed on insecure contracts.



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