

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

6 December 2024

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

South Korean commuter rail workers strike for improved pay and conditions

Korean Railway Workers' Union (KRWU) members began an indefinite strike on Thursday after talks for improved wages and conditions failed to reach agreement. The strike affected state-run Korea Railway Corporation (Korail) services including the high-speed KTX train and Seoul subway services on lines 1, 3 and 4, as well as the Gyeongchun, Gyeongui-Jungang, Suin-Bundang and Seohae lines.

Five hours of negotiations between Korail and the KRWU on Wednesday failed to resolve disputes over wages, unpaid salaries, performance incentives and workforce expansion. The union's demands include a 2.5 percent pay increase, bonuses equivalent to those paid by other public organisations, the hiring of more safety personnel and the transition to a four-team, two-shift system to ensure workers do not work two consecutive night shifts.

Separately, Seoul Metro unions affiliated with the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) said they would strike on Friday if last-minute wage talks failed. They are also calling for the withdrawal of a restructuring plan to slash 2,000 employees by 2026. Seoul Metro operates subway lines 1 through to 8 and its unions have similar demands as the KRWU.

India: JCT cotton mill workers in Punjab protest power cuts

JCT cotton mill workers in Phagwara, Punjab state, protested power cuts to their premises, which is known as Thappar colony, on December 1. Workers said they are being deprived of power even though they did not have any outstanding bills.

In October, workers protested the looting by mill directors of their Provident Fund and gratuity. One of the directors, who opened fire on the demonstrators, was arrested following a later protest by workers.

Ludhiana Civil Hospital contract workers demand permanency and higher pay

Contract "user charges" employees from the Ludhiana Civil Hospital in

Punjab protested outside the deputy commissioner's complex on Monday to demand permanent jobs and higher wages. "User charges" employees are directly hired by hospital authorities to overcome staff shortages and are paid directly by the hospital.

A spokesman from the User Charges Mulazim Sangharsh Committee said they were part-time employees who are only supposed to do four-hour shifts but were being made to work as much as the regular employees and not paid extra. They called for equal pay for equal work, identity cards from the health department and paid sick leave without any deductions.

The workers had been employed at the hospital for several years—some for a decade—without being made permanent. Their meagre monthly wages range from 4,500 rupees (\$US53) to 6,500 rupees.

Didrugarh tea estate workers in Assam protest oil exploration

Workers from the Majjan Tea Estate in Dibrugarh protested oil and gas drilling by Oil India Limited (OIL) in the grounds of their tea estate on December 1. Workers said that the drilling would lead to further soil erosion and more climatic disasters in their region. They said the agricultural lands and many regions around the Brahmaputra River have been inundated during floods. The Assam Cha Mazdoor Sangh (Assam Tea Workers Union) organised the protest.

Pakistan: Khyber Pakhtunkhwa municipality workers demand overdue salaries

Haripur Tehsil municipal administration workers protested on Monday to demand payment of two-months' unpaid salaries. Workers said it had become routine for payment of their salaries to be delayed by two months.

Most of the workers are either low-paid daily wage employees or contract workers. Protesters said that the delayed payments had created a financial crisis for them and that they would continue their action until they were paid.

Bangladesh: National Tea Company tea gardens workers end their long-running strike

Hundreds of workers from 12 state-owned National Tea Company (NTC) tea gardens in Habiganj, Moulvibazar and Sylhet ended their strike

and returned to work on Thursday after the company agreed to begin paying three months' outstanding wages. Workers walked out on October 21.

The return to work followed a tripartite meeting between workers, company management and labour department officials on Sunday. The agreement stipulated that payments of all outstanding entitlements would start from Thursday and be completed by March 31.

The company agreed that workers will be paid regularly every week and the daily wage of 178.5 taka (\$US1.50) would be increased by 5 percent, starting this month. Workers had also demanded payment of outstanding rations and overdue Provident Fund contributions.

A union spokesman said that about 50,000 workers and their dependents at the gardens are forced to live on poverty wages.

Laid-off Bangladeshi garment workers demand reinstatement

Garment workers from Rezaul Apparels in Gazipur held a four-hour demonstration on Wednesday with 11 demands, including reinstatement of laid-off workers and attendance bonus. The protest started at around 9:00 a.m. outside their workplace in BSCIC Industrial Area at Konabari. Factory authorities declared the plant, which employs about 1,400 people, closed after the demonstration.

Essential Energy electricians continue five months of industrial action in NSW

Long-running industrial action by 1,800 electricians from the state-owned power utility Essential Energy has entered its fifth month. Electrical Trades Union (ETU) members from 92 Essential Energy depots are maintaining work bans imposed on August 8, followed by ongoing ad hoc one-hour stoppages which began on October 3. The electricians stepped up their action and walked out for 72 hours on Tuesday.

Essential Energy builds and operates electricity services for over 1,500 regional, rural and remote communities in New South Wales.

The ETU is in dispute with the state Labor government over Essential Energy's enterprise agreement pay rise offer. Workers rejected the company's latest pay offer in October, which included a 15 percent pay rise over three years, a 1 percent increase to superannuation and an upfront payment of \$5,000. They want a 26 percent pay increase over the three-year agreement and a 1.5 percent rise in superannuation to achieve pay parity with their city and interstate counterparts. The union has also called for a \$4.50 per hour employee retention allowance.

The ETU says 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.

Dnata airport ground workers vote for industrial action

Over 1,000 Dnata airport ground workers in Queensland, New South Wales and South Australia have voted overwhelmingly (by 98 percent) for industrial action in their dispute with Dnata over its proposed enterprise agreement. The Transport Workers Union (TWU) members want more hours, fairer rosters and better pay.

The TWU reported that last week after 92 percent of Dnata workers voted no to the company's proposed agreement, the company made another "offer" but with no changes to the overall terms and conditions. Dnata workers rejected it again, this time with a 94 percent "no" vote.

Dnata is one of the main recipients of cost-cutting ground-handling contracts organised by Qantas Airways after it illegally sacked 1,700 workers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Workers at four Qube Ports bulk terminals resume industrial action

Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) members from Qube Ports bulk-handling facilities in Adelaide, Brisbane, Darwin, and Port Kembla began seven days of industrial action on Friday over stalled negotiations for new enterprise agreements. Meanwhile, about 250 MUA members at five Qube bulk ports in Western Australia voted last week for industrial action, which will begin before the end of December.

The current action includes bans on night shifts, shift extensions, work on ships for the first 8 hours in port, shifts longer than 8 hours, and start times for all shifts apart from 7 a.m., 3 p.m. and 11 p.m. Work stoppages of varying durations ranging from one hour to 24 hours are being held at Brisbane, Darwin and Port Kembla.

The MUA has been trying to reach a deal with Qube on 19 expired enterprise agreements covering 21 port facilities and over 1,000 workers around Australia since October last year. The MUA has accused Qube of deliberately delaying negotiations, despite repeated efforts to secure new agreements before the current agreements expired.

Workers rejected Qube's 5 percent pay rise offer over each of the first two years of a new agreement, and 4 percent in each of the two subsequent years. The MUA says members' wages have declined by 14 percent in real terms while Qube profits have risen by 148 percent since the last agreement.

Workers also want earlier notification of shift start times, a 10-hour break between shifts, and 48 hours off after maximum consecutive shifts.

Ausgrid union ends industrial action, imposing sell-out deal

The Electrical Trades Union (ETU), which covers about 1,500 electricians from the power utility Ausgrid, in New South Wales, ended four months of industrial action on Tuesday after endorsing a new enterprise agreement. The deal falls far short of what members had demanded.

Bargaining for the new agreement started in May. Ausgrid's original pay offer was 7 percent for the first year, followed by 2.7 percent for the second and third years, or the consumer price index if it is higher. Workers wanted 8 percent annual pay increases in the three-year agreement to compensate for previous union-brokered agreements in which their real wages had declined by 10 percent since 2016.

The ETU accepted Ausgrid's revised pay increase in the Fair Work Commission, an offer not much higher than the original offer. The deal, if accepted by workers, gives pay rises of only 7 percent, 3 percent and 3 percent over three years, guaranteed role progression and allowance increases. Workers will vote on the deal on December 18.

Western Australian court security workers strike again over pay

About 200 security workers from Ventia, which provides court security, custodial services and prisoner transport in Western Australia, walked off the job for seven hours on November 29 and demonstrated outside state parliament. The security employees stopped work for four hours three weeks ago to demand a decent pay rise and improvement in safety.

The Transport Workers Union, which covers the workers, claimed Ventia workers are paid up to 24 percent less than those of their competitors doing the same job.

Forest Fire Management Victoria workers take action for pay rise

Over 600 Australian Workers Union (AWU) members employed by Forest Fire Management Victoria (FFMV) began industrial action on December 28 for higher pay. They held a 30-minute stopwork meeting and imposed bans on non-emergency tasks, and on taking meal breaks in the field, instead returning to depots.

The AWU has been in negotiations with the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action (DEECA) since June last year, but negotiations deadlocked over the state Labor government's insistence that its cost-cutting 3 percent wage cap policy can only be exceeded if its employees make concessions on current conditions.

The AWU says Forest Firefighters working under the Field Staff and Wild Dog Controller Enterprise Agreement are some of the worst paid state sector workers, languishing in the bottom 5 percent. In a media release, the union admitted its members are "paid poverty wages." It did not reveal its role in negotiating the poverty wage in previous agreements.

The AWU is limiting industrial action and appealing for a meeting with the Victorian premier.

DEECA workers are employed in a wide range of duties, including recovery and prevention of bush fires and floods and the containment of animal and agricultural pandemics.

St Vincent's private hospital nurses strike again

For the second time in two weeks, Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation (ANMF) members at four St Vincent's private hospitals in Victoria walked off the job for four hours at 12.45 p.m. on Thursday over low pay and unsafe nurse/patient ratios. About 150 nurses attended a rally at Carlton Gardens in Melbourne where the ANMF announced that industrial action will be escalated to holding 4-hour rolling stoppages at 7 a.m. every day commencing December 13.

Last week, the ANMF rejected St Vincent's latest proposed enterprise agreement. It said the offer included some improved conditions but that the original pay offer had been reduced by 0.5 percent to 4 percent. The union said the offer failed to address safe patient workloads and ratios, improved allowances and did not contain improvements that were recently included in the 2024–28 public sector nurses and midwives' agreement.

Nurses and midwives want pay parity with public sector nurses and midwives including new and improved allowances and more than 40 improved entitlements and working conditions.

The ANMF has over 800 members at St Vincent's private hospitals in Fitzroy, East Melbourne, Werribee and Kew. Members began protected industrial action November 18 that could include bans on overtime, taking the full meal break, ban on redeployment between wards, wearing ANMF t-shirts and collecting administrative data and 24 others.

Victorian government dental health workers campaign for pay rise

About 150 state government Oral Health Practitioners (OHPs), including dental hygienists, dental therapists and oral health therapists, have called on their union, the Victorian Allied Health Professionals Association (VAHPA) for a Fair Work Commission ballot to hold an industrial action ballot.

The move comes after 12 months of failed negotiations with the state Labor government for a wage increase in a new enterprise agreement. The workers, called the Smile Squad, supply dental services to school children.

The VAHPA says OHPs are paid just \$6 per hour above Australia's poverty basic wage. This wage is so low that some dental workers need a second job to make ends meet. The VAHPA members want wage parity with other dental workers doing the same work.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact