

Three day strike by New Zealand nurses

A correspondent
30 March 1999

About 1,800 nurses in the Waikato region of the North Island of New Zealand went on strike for three days last week over their employment contract. The strike was the first industrial action taken by the region's nurses for 10 years, and the first of such duration in their history.

The nurses, employed by the regional health authority Health Waikato, stopped work at the main hospital in the regional city of Hamilton as well as rural hospitals in Thames, Taumarunui, Te Kuiti, Tokoroa, Te Awamutu and Morrinsville. In Hamilton, 80 patients had to be moved to other areas as the hospital's services were severely curtailed. Clinics, outpatients' services and non-urgent surgery had to be canceled.

The strike came nine months after the beginning of negotiations over a new collective employment contract. The nurses are demanding a 2 percent pay increase for each of the next two years, backdated to last July. Other claims include an additional salary grade for those on the Nursing Career Pathway, four weeks annual leave after four years service instead of after seven years, and 10 days' sick leave instead of eight. Nurses are also seeking the development of new educational policies and the provision of a crèche.

Health Waikato is offering only a one percent rise for one year with no backdating, and no increase in leave provisions. Health authority chief executive Dr. Jan White claimed that the main issues in the protracted negotiations had been addressed, and that the management's pay offer was "reasonable and within the constraints of what the business can offer". White further claimed that nurses in the Waikato are well paid compared with other health authorities outside the main city of Auckland.

The National Party government is insisting that any pay rises be funded through savings in other areas of expenditure. In a confidential memo leaked during the week, incoming Minister of Health, Wyatt Creech, told

health administrators throughout the country that there should be no pay rises in the public sector without improvements in "productivity".

Strike activities included a 300-strong candlelight vigil held in Hamilton on the eve of the strike, followed the next day by a picket at the main hospital involving 500 nurses and supporters who waved placards, banged pots and sang. Over the following two days, 150 remained on 24-hour picket duty in Hamilton while hundreds of flying pickets were sent to the hospitals in the outlying districts. Marches were held in Hamilton and Thames.

Strikers won significant public support. As the nurses marched through Hamilton, people stopped their cars to get out and applaud. Shopworkers came out onto the footpaths to do the same. The picket in Hamilton saw a steady stream of cars and trucks tooting their support. One picket described the strike and its response as "an awesome show of solidarity".

Health Waikato went to considerable lengths to try to beat the strike, including importing strikebreakers who were paid extra for their services. The registered nurses were paid \$20 per hour instead of the usual \$18, with non-registered nurses paid \$15 instead of \$10. In addition, accommodation, childcare and taxis were all paid for.

The nurses linked the struggle over their contract with the cuts to public health. A union delegate said Waikato Hospital is currently down on nursing numbers by 44 full-time equivalent positions. As a result, patients on waiting lists are having surgery canceled and the hospital's intensive care unit cannot be properly staffed.

Kath Phillips, a nurse from the intensive care unit, said the strike was not just about money. "If they give us 2 percent and no conditions we won't take it", she said. "It's about safe staffing. Some of us invest 30 to 40 years in this hospital. CEOs come and go like changing your knickers. This is just the beginning".

Simon Auty, an operating theatre nurse, said: "It's about having more than one nurse on a ward in the middle of the night. It's about being fair".

One supporter of the strike wrote to the local newspaper, explaining that he had recently been relegated to the bottom of the surgery waiting list for a long-standing medical complaint. He had been told that there were insufficient funds for elective surgery to treat his condition. At the same time, Waikato Health's new chief executive had started work on a salary of \$260,000 per annum; an increase of \$80,000 or 44.4 percent above that paid to her predecessor.

The cuts to health services and working conditions of nurses began under the previous Labour government. During the last strike, held in 1989, Labour's finance minister David Caygill and health minister Helen Clark, now the Labour leader, instructed the health boards to work within budgets that were being slashed by 3 percent.

Workers were invited to fund their pay "increase" by conceding conditions such as penalty rates, sick leave and travel allowances at a cost of \$30-\$50 per week. While the State Services Commission subsequently withdrew these clawback demands, it gloatingly described the subsequent pay settlement--a meagre 2 percent--as "cheap".



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