

Papua New Guinea nurses union calls off nationwide strike

John Braddock
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Following a meeting on Tuesday with government ministers, the Papua New Guinea Nurses Association (PNGNA) cancelled a nationwide nurses' strike planned for Wednesday.

The PNGNA had called the strike after balloting its 5,000 members, who have not been paid properly for nine months. The union's 22 branches across the country all signed resolutions supporting the strike, which would have involved public sector nurses from rural health facilities, community health posts, health centres, provincial hospitals and the four regional hospitals.

The union's claims include non-payment of wages and other benefits. An industrial award was signed with the government last December, which was supposed to take effect in January. PNGNA acting president Steven Nawik said the government had ignored the agreement it reached with the union.

According to Nawik, the award included pay increases, a "work value study" on nurses throughout the country and the establishment of a housing committee. The union had submitted a proposal to the Health Department to begin the work value study in January but that did not happen.

The government declared the nurses' strike would be illegal. Industrial Registrar Helen Saleu had refused the union's application for a secret strike ballot, which is a legal requirement.

The PNGNA is now collaborating with the government to enforce ongoing attacks on the health system. Nawik and the PNGNA executive left Tuesday's meeting declaring the sides reached "a near positive outcome." Nawik said the government accepted that it had signed a binding agreement and was now "looking for funds to honour that commitment."

However, government negotiators Chief Secretary Isaac Lupari and Health Secretary Pascoe Kase said there was "no appropriation in the 2016 Budget" for the PNGNA award. The government had re-adjusted the budget due to a sharp drop in revenue, and it would be "extremely difficult to find savings at this stage," Lupari said. "I have made the PNGNA executives aware of the above and that if the government is to honour it, savings must be identified in the budget." He added: "Sometimes, industrial awards cannot be met in an expeditious manner."

The union agreed that the PNGNA will not take any industrial action, including strikes. Lupari thanked the union leaders for "their maturity and understanding on the matter." With the union's agreement, the government will identify "savings" in the budget, and make "some payments" to nurses during the year.

In other words, thousands of nurses will continue to be improperly paid. Public services and living conditions of the wider working class will be plundered to meet budget shortfalls. A major betrayal is being imposed.

The dire situation facing nurses, and the entire health system, is part of the deep economic and social crisis confronting the working class under the government of Prime Minister Peter O'Neill. Besides nurses, thousands of teachers and other public sector workers have been without pay since the beginning of the year.

The global commodity price crash has hit PNG's oil, mineral and gas exports. Total government income has dropped by 20 percent in 12 months, and public debt is set to increase this year to 32.2 percent of gross domestic product. Last month, the government announced further spending cuts and revenue raising measures.

Under pressure from global financial agencies, the

government is imposing a brutal austerity agenda, including 40 percent funding cuts across the health system. Hospitals and clinics face shortages of blood bags, test kits and other medical kits. Doctors at the Western Highland's Mt Hagen hospital have struck three times this year, citing problems such as no microbiology unit, closure of the operating theatre for eight months, no blood test department for six months, and the blood bank crippled for a year.

Following a walkout on August 24, the health minister ordered the doctors to return to work under threats of dismissal and legal action. The Doctors Association said PNG is facing a "catastrophic meltdown" from a combination of "corruption with financial debt, slashing of health sector funding, and diminished production of health workers."

Far from being confined to PNG, this situation is a sharp expression of the global assault that has propelled doctors and nurses into struggles internationally over working conditions and the destruction of public health. Currently, 4,800 nurses in Minnesota, USA are on strike over benefits and workloads, and 50,000 junior doctors in Britain voted to strike over excessive workloads after rejecting a sell-out agreement reached between the British Medical Association and the government.

Further budget cuts in PNG will compound a ballooning social disaster. According to Oxfam, 37 percent of the population already lives on less than \$US1.25 a day. Diseases of poverty, malaria, drought-induced starvation and HIV/AIDS are rife due to the lack of health facilities and programs. More than 60 percent of the population has no access to safe drinking water.

This year, students and sections of workers have taken up significant struggles against the O'Neill government, only to be led into a dead-end by union leaderships, civil society groups and parliamentary parties. Opposition leader Don Polye has remained silent on the nurses' dispute, because he is as committed as the government to sweeping austerity measures.

None of the immense problems facing workers, youth and the rural poor will be addressed, let alone resolved, by the political representatives of the PNG ruling class. As the WSWS noted in drawing the lessons of the students' struggle, the root cause of the social

hardships facing millions is the profit system and the domination of the PNG economy by global banks and corporations, particularly the mining giants. That can only be overcome on the basis of a political fight by the working class for socialist internationalism.



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