

New Zealand nurses stage first nationwide strike in 30 years

Our reporters
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Nearly 30,000 nurses, midwives and healthcare assistants took part in a 24-hour strike yesterday across New Zealand—the first nationwide strike by public hospital workers since 1989.

Demonstrations and pickets were held throughout the country, with hundreds attending in Auckland and Wellington. More than 1,000 health workers and supporters joined a march in Christchurch. There were well-attended pickets in Dunedin, Hamilton, Napier, Nelson, New Plymouth, Timaru, Invercargill, Whangarei and many other towns.

The strike attracted widespread support from the working class, which has endured a decade of austerity measures enforced by the entire political establishment. Among those who joined the pickets were school teachers, who have voted to strike next month, as well as many hospital patients, including some whose medical procedures were postponed because of the strike.

The Public Service Association, the biggest union in the country, felt compelled to proclaim its support for nurses. Four thousand PSA members at the Inland Revenue Department and the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment held a two-hour strike on Monday against low wages.

The strike attracted significant media attention and support from workers internationally. Messages of support and photos from Australian health workers were widely shared on Facebook. The New Zealand strike is part of a wave of anti-austerity struggles around the world, including mass teachers' strikes in the United States, public sector walkouts in France and protests against cuts to the National Health Service in Britain.

According to media reports, thousands of non-urgent medical procedures were deferred. Radio NZ said an estimated 60 to 70 percent of public hospital workers were involved in the strike.

A number of doctors and volunteer nurses provided life

preserving services (LPS). Staffing levels were reportedly relatively high at some hospitals. One nurse told the *Manawatu Standard* that Palmerston North Hospital had “more staff than on a normal day” under provisions for LPS. He said this was an indictment of the usual low level of staffing, telling the paper: “We should strike more often. That’s how crazy it is.”

The strike went ahead in defiance of the New Zealand Nurses Organisation (NZNO). The union bureaucracy cancelled an earlier strike scheduled for July 5—an anti-democratic move that provoked outrage among health workers—and desperately tried to impose a sellout deal to call off yesterday’s action.

A majority of the NZNO’s 29,500 members have so far rejected four offers. The most recent one, recommended by union leaders, maintained dangerously low staffing levels and included a meagre pay rise of 3 percent per year over three years.

Yesterday’s strike represented a significant escalation in the working class struggle against the Labour Party-NZ First-Greens coalition government, which is continuing to under-fund health, education and other essential services that have been starved and cut back following the 2008 financial crisis.

On Wednesday, Finance Minister Grant Robertson insisted there would be no more money allocated to settle the dispute. He told *Newshub*: “I have to balance the books, I have a lot of competing needs to look out for.”

Acting Prime Minister Winston Peters told the media yesterday: “We’re not unsympathetic to the nurses’ plight... but we’ve got to be realistic.” According to the *New Zealand Herald*, Peters “dismissed as irrelevant the argument that the government could afford \$2.3 billion”—four times the amount offered to hospital staff—to buy four new air force planes.

As well as spending billions on the military, the government is refusing to increase taxes on the country’s

super-rich to address record levels of inequality, homelessness, and the crisis in the health system.

NZNO leaders, who previously told workers there was nothing to be gained from striking, refused to make any specific new demands. Union chief executive Memo Musa told Fairfax Media more funding was needed, without saying how much. Negotiations with DHBs, which have dragged on for a year, resumed today.

Members of the Socialist Equality Group spoke to striking workers in Auckland and Wellington and distributed an announcement of an online forum on Saturday at 4 p.m. (NZ time) to discuss a socialist perspective on the health workers' struggle, including the need for a rebellion against the NZNO and the building of new rank-and-file committees controlled by workers.

Outside Wellington Hospital, a nurse who remembered the 1989 strike said the NZNO "have lost their way." She believed unions were "much more militant" during the 1980s and denounced the latest union-backed offer as "exactly the same" as the previous one overwhelmingly rejected by members. "Nine percent is not much over three years," she explained.

A co-worker agreed, saying: "Every couple of months living costs rise like crazy but our income is stagnant. We won't be able to sustain ourselves in the long run."

Margaret, a nurse with eleven years' experience, called for more staff so that workers "feel safe in the environment where they're working. Security is important not just for us but for the public as well. Pay is also essential. The cost of living here in New Zealand is very high," she said.

Another Wellington nurse condemned the government's claim that there is no more money. She said: "We are paying a lot of tax and they are spending a lot of money in different places. I heard today that they are spending millions of dollars on militarisation. We don't need it, we don't have any enemies. They are neglecting the health sector."

Heidi, a cancer patient who joined the Wellington picket, stated: "I'm in hospital on a regular basis and I've seen how hard the nurses work and the conditions they work under. The last time I was in overnight there was a nurse who started at three in the afternoon and she was there all night."

She added: "Our MPs don't have to march and picket for their pay rises and the Defence Force doesn't have to march and beg for their billions of dollars."

In Auckland, Jodie said the nurses' union should be demanding more. "One of my colleagues found her pay

slip from eight years ago and her pay increase was just three dollars since then. What the teachers are asking for is about 15 to 16 percent, so nurses deserve the same."

She described the appalling staffing levels, saying "in some wards there are essentially two nurses or midwives looking after 20 patients at night. That's not safe. What happens if there's an admission, or someone collapses, and there's hardly anyone there to help out?"

Emily, who has been working as a nurse for just over a year, attended the Auckland protest after an eight-hour early shift. "Our health system has been underfunded for decades," she said. "I care about my profession, I care about my patients and the type of care that's provided. We need safe staffing and to be paid what we're worth. We're also underpaid because we are a female-dominated profession.

"If we look at our cousins in Australia, we should be on par with them. That's where all our nurses are going to get better pay." Some nurses in Australia earn up to 30 percent more than their New Zealand counterparts, though they face the same issues of understaffing and underfunding.

Asked what she thought of teachers preparing to strike, Emily said: "I say go for it. Their cause is just as important as ours."

The authors also recommend:

Socialist Equality Group (NZ) to hold online forum:
The way forward for nurses and health workers
[11 July 2018]

Nurses reject union-backed sellout, prepare nationwide strike
[10 July 2018]

Open letter to NZ nurses' Facebook group: Reverse the ban on WSWs articles and criticisms of the union
[13 July 2018]



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