

New Zealand doctors to hold second nationwide strike

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More than 3,300 junior doctors in public hospitals across New Zealand will strike for 48 hours starting tomorrow, in the second two-day nationwide strike this month in opposition to major attacks on working conditions. The Resident Doctors Association (RDA) last week confirmed that its members had also voted for a third strike on February 12-13.

The country's 20 District Health Boards (DHBs) are now seeking to extend the number of consecutive days that doctors can be rostered to work from 10 to 12. DHBs also want the power to force doctors to work shifts longer than 16 hours and to relocate anywhere in the country.

Health workers are attempting to fight back against the drastic under-funding of the public health system. The doctors' strikes follow a nationwide strike by over 30,000 nurses and healthcare assistants last year and industrial action by ambulance paramedics, over low wages and unsafe staffing levels. Some 1,100 hospital-based midwives are preparing a series of 12-hour strikes in mid-February, after also striking last year.

New Zealand workers have joined an international resurgence of working class struggles against austerity. About 700,000 teachers and government employees in Tamil Nadu are on strike following a general strike in India. In France, tens of thousands of "yellow vest" workers are continuing to protest against the government's pro-business policies. In Matamoros, Mexico, 70,000 factory workers have organised independently of the corporatist unions to carry out the largest strike in North America in more than 20 years.

New Zealand Health Minister David Clark and Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern have remained silent on the doctors' strikes, with Ministry officials saying the dispute is a matter for DHBs and the RDA. DHB staffing budgets, however, are determined by

government funding. The Labour Party-led government's pledges in the 2017 election to properly fund the health system have proven to be a fraud: its health budget has failed to keep pace with population growth and the needs of the ageing population.

Thousands of people have been unable to access medical care, with hospitals overflowing with patients, and severely understaffed. Health workers' wages have been virtually frozen relative to the cost of living. On January 18 the *New Zealand Herald* reported that Clark "has warned district health boards to tighten their belts," i.e., make further spending cuts, to reduce their deficits.

Doctors are stretched to breaking point, frequently working shifts as long as 15 hours, which inevitably puts patients at risk. One doctor, Moayed, wrote on the RDA's Facebook page: "We are exposed to complex patients and complex needs ... [and] traumatic events. We are stressed as we have exams, deadlines, clinical workload, meeting DHBs targets, our family needs and personal needs. Safe rostering isn't a luxury. It is a necessity! It is a basic condition for all employees."

Other workers have spoken out in support of doctors. A student nurse who also works part-time at Wellington Hospital told the *World Socialist Web Site* that doctors worked extremely hard: "I see some are there when I show up to work and are still there after I leave. They're working the same amount as nurses and some work more consecutive days. If the [DHBs] want more people to work hours they should just hire more people."

She said hospital staff were under stress because "there's not enough hands to do everything. A lot of people I work with talk about how hard their job is and how tired they can be. Some nurses who show up day after day look so tired."

A hospital cleaner employed by the contract company Spotless Services said: “I wish the doctors the best of luck. We don’t want them too tired and run down; they might make a mistake. It’s a health and safety issue.”

He said about a dozen hospital cleaning jobs had been cut in recent years to reduce costs. He believed the Labour-led government was “the lesser of two evils,” but funding for healthcare had not increased enough. He added that orderlies were paid less than \$20 an hour and were prepared to strike if they do not get a meaningful pay rise this year.

The trade union bureaucracy is working to isolate the strike and ensure doctors are defeated. Fairfax Media reported on January 23 that Council of Trade Unions leader Richard Wagstaff said doctors had “the right” to take industrial action but “stopped short of standing in solidarity” with them.

The Public Service Association (PSA), New Zealand’s largest union, actively sought to undermine doctors’ conditions by helping to establish the Specialty Trainees of New Zealand (STONZ), a rival union to the RDA, with about 100 doctor members.

Last November STONZ agreed to the DHBs’ clawbacks. In an email leaked to the media, PSA national secretary Erin Polaczuk attacked the RDA for refusing to affiliate to the CTU.

The RDA itself does not represent any alternative for workers. Like the PSA and the New Zealand Nurses Organisation (NZNO), the junior doctors’ union is led by a privileged bureaucracy which, while opposing the sellout deal accepted by STONZ, has pledged to enforce the existing intolerable working conditions in hospitals and is ready to sacrifice even more. A statement on the RDA’s Facebook page on January 25 said that in last-minute talks with DHBs “we withdrew almost all our claims, [and] offered changes to the safer hours provision to allow more flexible rostering.” These concessions were not enough to reach a deal.

The RDA agrees with the meagre pay offer of 3 percent per annum—which barely keeps pace with official inflation and is below the real increase in housing, fuel and other living costs. The same pay offer was repeatedly rejected by nurses last year, only to be pushed through in a rotten deal by the NZNO.

Doctors and other health workers must draw the lessons from the NZNO’s sellout, which maintained low wages and dangerously understaffed wards. To

wage a real fight against austerity, health workers must overcome the division and isolation imposed by the unions by rebelling against these pro-capitalist organisations and forming new committees of action controlled by workers themselves. These committees must unite workers in hospitals, schools, transport and other workers on the basis of a socialist program for the complete reorganisation of society, in accordance with human need.

Workers should decisively reject the Labour government’s lie, echoed by the NZNO, that there is not enough money to solve the healthcare crisis. The billions of dollars in the hands of the super-rich must be redistributed to properly fund health and other essential services. Thousands of doctors and nurses must be hired immediately, on high wages, to reduce the working day to eight hours and improve conditions for patients.



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