

Second nationwide strike by New Zealand doctors

Our reporters
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Around 3,300 junior doctors from New Zealand's public hospitals walked off the job on Tuesday in their second 48-hour strike in a fortnight to oppose attacks on their working conditions. Pickets were held outside hospitals in Wellington, Christchurch, Auckland and Hawke's Bay, each involving about 50 doctors and supporters.

The union, the Resident Doctors' Association (RDA), last week confirmed that members have also voted for a third two-day strike beginning on February 12, after negotiations with the 20 District Health Boards (DHBs) for a new collective agreement broke down.

The DHBs want to extend the number of consecutive days that doctors can be rostered to work from 10 to 12. The employers also want the power to force doctors to work shifts longer than 16 hours and to relocate them anywhere in the country.

Doctors already work under notoriously trying conditions. Long hours, including 30-hour working weekends, leave them exhausted, putting patients' and their own safety at risk.

The doctors' fight is not solely an industrial dispute with the DHBs. It is, above all, a political struggle against the Labour-NZ-First-Green Party coalition government, which is imposing the deepening austerity measures demanded by big business. Its right-wing "fiscal responsibility" program is aimed at suppressing public spending while returning billions in budget surpluses.

In December, Labour's health minister, David Clark, wrote to DHB heads demanding "rigorous" action to improve "financial and non-financial performance" i.e., further spending cuts. Already, thousands of people are unable to access medical care, with hospitals severely understaffed and overflowing with patients.

As with other workers who have taken strike action in New Zealand and internationally over the past year, doctors enjoy widespread public sympathy. They are

confronted, however, with thoroughly corporatised trade unions, which are working to isolate the strike and ensure that the doctors are defeated.

The Public Service Association, New Zealand's largest union, has actively sought to undermine doctors' conditions by helping to establish the Specialty Trainees of New Zealand (STONZ), a rival union to the RDA, which claims about 500 members. Last November STONZ agreed to the DHBs' clawbacks.

The umbrella NZ Council of Trade Unions has remained virtually silent throughout the dispute and organised no support whatsoever. The doctors' strike pickets, which the RDA limited to just an hour-and-a-half, have been held with no mass involvement by other unions and only a token appearance by NZ Nurses Organisation (NZNO) officials. This is despite another looming series of rolling stoppages by hospital midwives and plans for nationwide walkouts by teachers.

The RDA has called on the DHBs to withdraw their "clawbacks" but is not fighting for any improvements, only maintenance of the "status quo." The union's salary claim is for a similar pay increase to that imposed in a sellout deal struck last year by the NZNO, which gave 30,000 nurses 3 percent per annum over three years. When measured against the rising cost of living, this amounts to a wage freeze.

If the doctors' employment contract is not settled next month, they will be forced onto individual agreements. In a bid to reach a deal, the RDA offered to change a "safer hours" provision to allow more "flexible" rostering. The union has also invited the DHBs and the senior doctors' union, the Association of Salaried Medical Specialists (ASMS), to discuss ways to address "unintended consequences" of changes which were designed to make rosters safer following strikes in 2016 and 2017.

The moves towards a sellout deal underscores the need for a rebellion against the unions and the establishment of

new organisations of struggle, including independent rank-and-file committees. These would be tasked with breaking the isolation imposed by the unions, and coordinating joint industrial and political action by workers throughout the health sector and more broadly.

The role of the Ardern-led government in the protracted gutting of public services makes plain that workers require a new political perspective, in opposition to Labour and the entire political establishment. This means the fight for a workers' government that would place the banks and corporations under public ownership and democratic workers' control, and allocate billions of dollars to education, healthcare and other vital social services.

The WSWS spoke with some of those who picketed outside Wellington Hospital yesterday.

Cathal, from Ireland, has been working in New Zealand for five years. He explained: "We are struggling to reach a settlement with the DHBs who are calling for a lot of retractions which would mean stepping back to less rates than we have already." One of the main issues was the attempt by the DHBs "to remove union protections, such as limitations on working unreasonable hours, from the contract. The DHBs want the ability to unilaterally make changes to hours, which is a big difference," he said.

"There's a lot of difficulty between the unions at the moment," Cathal added, saying the sellout agreement reached by STONZ, abetted by the PSA, was "being used as a lever against our contract negotiations." The DHBs are just "waiting for our contract to expire," he concluded. Asked about the Labour government, Cathal laughed and said he remained "hopeful" it could improve things.

Brian said, "If the February deadline passes, we will continue to be dissatisfied with conditions that are less than we had previously. We are not looking for massive gains here, but for the right to be represented and continue with a contract with conditions that have previously been agreed on."

Brian said it "would be nice" to be fighting for an improvement in conditions, "but we've previously made some significant gains in terms of safe working hours. Traditionally we haven't struck for large increases in pay but for fundamental issues. Unfortunately, we are increasingly getting bogged down in even getting the most basic things. This is the second strike that can be seen as a failure on the part of the DHBs. We want to be in there doing our jobs on the contract that was previously negotiated."

Rohit, one of four RDA delegates at Wellington Hospital, said: "The main reason we are striking is to maintain our current contract. We fought for 10-hour shifts, which we gained three years ago, but they are now trying to take that back."

Asked by the WSWS why the RDA is not fighting for real improvements in pay and conditions, Rohit said claims were initially put forward by the union in negotiations but were quickly withdrawn. "The DHB's just wouldn't come to the table and declared they would only give us the bare minimum," he said.

The RDA had decided to "do what it can to get a settlement, and just get on with it. They [the DHBs] are still not coming to the table, but are saying they are negotiating in good faith. I think the [DHBs] are slowly starting to realise that [what they've offered] isn't going to be enough to just keep waiting, because we're just not going to stand for it," he said.

Evan, a manufacturing worker from Hamilton, joined the picket while visiting a relative in the hospital, who had recently undergone a 12-hour operation. Evan said: "I think the doctors' strike is great because I know in the hospital in Hamilton they work such long hours. You often have family members in there who are unwell, and having enough doctors onsite is what we need. You don't want them to be overworked and overstressed. Their conditions are terrible. They need all the support they can get."

Asked about the Labour government, Evan said he wanted to see "more being done for low-paid workers," like himself and his family, who "are finding it quite hard."



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