Striking midwives rally outside New Zealand parliament

Tom Peters
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On February 14, around 100 midwives and supporters protested outside the New Zealand parliament in Wellington during a one-day strike for better pay, staffing and working conditions.

About 1,100 public hospital-based midwives, members of the Midwifery Employee Representation and Advisory Service (MERAS), held rolling strikes throughout the week, with different regions striking on different days. Protests and pickets were held in Auckland, Whangarei, Christchurch, Tauranga, Hamilton and Palmerston North.

Last year MERAS members rejected an offer of a 9 percent pay rise spread over 18 months. The midwives' last collective agreement with the country's 20 District Health Boards (DHBs) expired in July 2017, meaning the offer equated to 3 percent a year over three years—well below the real increase in the cost of living, especially housing.

The offer was the same as the sellout agreement imposed on nearly 30,000 nurses and healthcare assistants last year by the New Zealand Nurses Organisation (NZNO) following a one-day nationwide strike. The NZNO bureaucracy wore down its members by presenting them with the same offer repeatedly and echoing the lies of the Labour Party-led government that there was "no more money" to address the crisis in hospitals, including the shortage of nurses and severely overcrowded wards.

The midwives' strike is part of an ongoing wave of strikes in the healthcare sector in opposition to the Labour-NZ First-Greens coalition government's austerity measures. About 3,300 junior doctors held a nationwide strike on February 12–13, their third walkout this year, to oppose attacks on their working conditions. On February 11, 5,500 hospital administration workers held stop-work meetings and voted in support of industrial action if DHBs do not offer a significant pay increase.

Teachers, transport workers and public sector workers have also held major strikes. The upsurge in New Zealand is part of the developing international class struggle, including mass strikes by manufacturing workers in Mexico, in opposition to the trade union bureaucracy, a national strike in Belgium, teacher strikes in the US, and strikes by 40,000 nurses in Ireland.

Midwives are determined to fight for a better deal. Thursday's rally, however, demonstrated how the trade unions are working to suppress any real campaign against the Labour-NZ First-Greens coalition government. The event reinforced the need for workers to politically break from these corporatist organisations and form rank-and-file committees, controlled by health workers themselves.

MERAS leader Jill Ovens told the gathering many health unions had "experienced difficulty in bargaining this year… we're all in this struggle together." She thanked a handful of Council of Trade Unions, Public Service Association and NZNO officials for their attendance.

Ovens revealed, however, that last year "the DHBs asked us, as they did with other health sector unions, to wait until the nurses had settled" before seeking their own pay agreement. The unions agreed to stand aside, helping to ensure that nurses and healthcare assistants were isolated and defeated, setting the benchmark for sellouts of midwives and other workers.

The MERAS leader did not mention the junior doctors' strike a day earlier, let alone call for a combined struggle of healthcare workers.

Ovens fraudulently depicted former Labour Prime Minister Helen Clark as a champion of midwives. As

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health minister in 1990, Clark introduced legislation allowing midwives to practise independently of a doctor's supervision. Ovens quoted Clark describing the law change as her greatest achievement for women—even though midwives' increased responsibility was not recognised with better wages.

The 1984–1990 Labour government of Prime Minister David Lange carried out a major assault on the working class, including privatisations, huge tax cuts for the rich, and mass redundancies in the public sector. Clark oversaw a tight spending cap on the deteriorating public health system. Following a nationwide nurses' strike in 1989, Labour refused to increase funding, and wages remained virtually frozen.

Protesters booed when Ovens announced that David Clark, Labour's current Health Minister, had refused to come outside parliament and hear the midwives' demands.

A few MPs from Labour, the Greens and the National Party made brief statements, feigning sympathy for midwives while committing themselves to nothing. Labour's Willow-Jean Prime vaguely promised "to work through these issues and try and get the outcome that you all are looking for."

National's health spokesman Michael Woodhouse was greeted with jeers as he ludicrously claimed to support "better recognition and remuneration of the fantastic work that you do." The previous National Party government implemented severe austerity measures following the 2008 financial crisis, including a wage freeze for healthcare workers and the drastic underfunding of hospital services.

Green Party co-leader Marama Davidson gave a no less cynical speech. After praising the midwives who helped her during her pregnancy, she declared: "You're not being paid what you deserve... we will support your voices in the halls and corridors of power."

The Greens are part of the governing coalition and the party's Julie Anne Genter is the Associate Minister of Health. The Greens fully supported Labour's 2018 budget, which continued to starve hospitals of funding.

Ovens indicated that a new pay offer is currently being finalised by the DHBs, which would address MERAS' demands, but did not give any details.

Several midwives spoke forcefully about the conditions they face in hospitals.

Lucy, a recent graduate who works in Auckland, told the rally: "I have prescribing rights and can order and interpret tests, admit and discharge women with my own judgement... I hold so much skill and responsibility, most of the time I can see a woman through her birth, labour, post-natal experience and out the door again without so much as consulting a doctor... They can't dignify me with a wage I can live on. I am paid $23 an hour."

The top rate for midwives with more than five years' experience is just $32.50 an hour.

Louise, a Wellington Hospital midwife with over 20 years' experience, told the WSWS: "I've seen things get worse in terms of the intensity of work, in terms of what we're expected to do on a shift. Once upon a time you could go to a shift and perhaps look after one or two women, now you're just all over the place. You're just so stretched."

Midwives were dealing with complicated cases previously seen in other areas of the hospital, she said. "For instance, once upon a time a lot of the babies that had complications would have been cared for in the neo-natal intensive care unit," but now they are often kept in the general post-natal ward and cared for by midwives.

"We find it difficult to recruit new midwives and to keep them," she explained. "Understaffing causes a great deal of stress in that work environment. It's hard to find time to go to the toilet, to have lunch, and you're lucky if you get off on time. It's intense and challenging, it's hard to sustain."

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