

Australia: Union shuts down nurses' strike at Sydney's Blacktown Hospital

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More than 150 nurses and midwives at Blacktown Hospital in western Sydney walked out for a 24-hour strike and held a determined protest march and rally outside the hospital last Thursday. They held placards saying "Respect Our Nurses" and chanted "Nurses and midwives under attack, fightback."

Their stoppage was halted however on Friday morning by the nursing trade union, acting on the orders of an industrial court.

The strike was in response to the deaths of five babies at the hospital in under two years, ongoing staffing shortages and concerns about patient safety. The nurses and midwives rejected offers from hospital management, which included just 15 additional full-time equivalent midwives and a review of the staffing model.

According to a NSW Nurses and Midwives Association (NSWNMA) representative, there are already eight staffing positions at the hospital that have not been filled, and nurses and midwives were not confident that the additional positions would be filled. Moreover, 15 additional staff would not be sufficient to cover all the wards and patients at Blacktown Hospital.

The walkout also came after at least 20 senior obstetricians at the hospital threatened to resign next February if their concerns about understaffing, lack of experienced staff and access to birthing facilities are not addressed.

Blacktown Hospital has one of the busiest maternity wards in the state of New South Wales (NSW), delivering over 4,000 babies each year. Since 2015, births at Blacktown Hospital have increased by 52.3 percent, yet staffing has risen just 11.5 percent.

At 10.30 on Thursday night, after four hours of management-union negotiations, the NSW Industrial Relations Commission (IRC) ordered the nurses not to engage in, or threaten to engage in, industrial action until January 27. If the order is contravened, industrial organisations face fines of up to \$10,000 for the first day that the contravention occurs and an additional \$5,000 for each day that it continues.

The NSWNMA promptly and predictably accepted the

orders and made clear that it will continue to negotiate with the management on the same offer that the nurses had rejected.

According to the *Sydney Morning Herald*, NSWNMA general secretary Brett Holmes said he hoped that the management's proposal of 15 extra midwives and a review of the staffing model would still be on the table and that negotiations would continue.

The IRC's orders are part of a desperate attempt by governments and the trade unions to suppress the growing anger and frustration among health workers over the gutting of public health services and the attacks on workers' conditions and wages before and during the coronavirus pandemic.

Like the federal Fair Work Act, introduced by the Rudd Labor government, NSW legislation outlaws virtually all strike action, except during union-controlled bargaining periods, and can impose injunctions and prosecutions if it deems action not in the "public interest."

Any concerted campaign in opposition to this would require a turn to other sections of workers both in NSW and nationally. Such a turn would bring workers into direct conflict with both the state and federal, Labor and Liberal-National governments.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been used to carry out further attacks on workers' wages and conditions. Earlier this month, the NSW government said it would reduce the annual pay cap for public servants, including health workers, from 2.5 percent to 1.5 percent for the next three financial years. That followed an IRC ruling that public sector workers would receive a mere 0.3 percent pay increase this year, not the 2.5 percent that was due on July 1. The unions claimed to oppose these real wage cuts, but ruled out taking industrial action during the pandemic.

The crisis at Blacktown hospital is indicative of a broader deterioration of the public health and hospital system, which is the product of decades of funding cuts and growing privatisation by state and federal governments.

Two weeks ago, nurses at the Port Macquarie Base

Hospital, 400 kilometres north of Sydney, rallied outside the hospital over excessive workloads and chronic understaffing across multiple wards and theatres. Despite the rising number of patients, staffing levels have decreased. At a meeting nurses opposed the opening of a new ward at the hospital and demanded management stop opening beds across multiple wards until adequate permanent staff were available.

The response of the unions to the IRC's orders highlights the fact that to defend even the most basic conditions, health workers, along with other public sector workers, must take matters out of the hands of the trade unions and establish their own, independent rank-and-file committees, committed to the fight to mobilise other sections of workers in NSW and throughout the country.

On Friday, hospital management and security prevented WSWs reporters from campaigning at the hospital and speaking with workers.

A number of health workers at Blacktown Hospital, who wished to remain anonymous due to fear of victimisation, spoke to the WSWs last week about the impossible workloads and conditions they face.

One nurse said: "There's just no time for a break. You go home exhausted. You almost don't want to come back to work. Right now, I've got a headache. You can't drink water; you barely have time to drink water. For me, I want to put 100 percent into my work. Because I'm so used to not taking breaks, I don't know how to take a break anymore. You just continually go, go, go."

"A normal shift is eight hours. Last Saturday I left at 4:30 p.m., so that's nine hours. The other day I left at 5pm, which is nine and a half. The longest unplanned overtime I've done is 7 a.m. to 5 p.m., with no break. You don't eat for ten hours. You're hungry. You worry because there's a point where you don't want to make errors. It's dangerous for patient and nurse. Without a break you can start to become exhausted. I don't know what's going on. We're all feeling this. I don't understand. They won't even give us a pay rise. What was the pay increase in NSW? 0.3 percent? It was offensive, to be honest."

Nurses and midwives can work up to 10 hours on a day shift or 11 hours on a night shift, and work during meal breaks is not paid as overtime.

A hospital dietician said: "There are not enough nurses. You try to find a nurse, and it's virtually impossible to do so. It's very hard to find a lot of the patients as well because they're down in the special care nursery or elsewhere. It's hard to get meals to them as well."

"Say the patient is on a specific diet, like gluten free, and I don't really know if she is or isn't, and the patient's not there, it's hard to get any sort of communication. If no one's

there, I can't get any information... It's very frustrating, and I feel for those poor ladies who have lost their babies."

Another nurse said: "I think the whole hospital is in a bit of a crisis. Staffing is not there. We're getting more acute patients, more complex patients. There's higher acuity with patients and we're just not equipped. There's more complex cares and nurses aren't competent in caring for these complex cares. So, more stress is put on senior nurses who are competent. The workload just increases after that."

"I can speak on behalf of nurses. Junior nurses who have just come out, new graduates, are given big workloads. They're junior, so they are taking on patients who need nurses with a bit more experience. The workload is just increasing on these junior nurses as well, which is dangerous for the patient and the nurse."

"The burnout for nurses means a lot of nurses want to quit and a lot of nurses are not enjoying their profession because there is just no support. I've been a nurse for four years, here at Blacktown. My unit is hectic at the moment. A lot of people are calling in sick because they're just burnt out."

Another nurse spoke about the senior obstetricians at the hospital threatening to resign. "They wouldn't be doing this unless there was real crisis. This is not a tantrum. What is happening is not being addressed by management. For them to do this is a cry for help."

"The doctors are overworked. Sometimes to get a doctor we have to wait a whole shift—eight hours—and pass it on to the next shift. It's not because they don't care but they have so much work to do. They will often be working on the computer on their lunch break. They don't get time out to mentally clear their minds. And they work long hours. I have real sympathy for them."



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