

New Zealand midwives strike over low pay and understaffing

Tom Peters
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About 1,500 midwives based in New Zealand public hospitals held an eight-hour strike last week, with different areas of the country striking on different days. Members of the Midwifery Employee Representation and Advisory Service (MERAS) union, joined by supporters, including parents and students, held protest rallies throughout the country, including in Auckland, Christchurch, Dunedin and smaller towns, culminating in a rally outside parliament in Wellington on August 12.

The strike is another sign of growing anger and opposition to Jacinda Ardern's Labour Party-led government's pro-business policies, including a pay freeze across the public sector and the refusal to properly fund healthcare. New Zealand's already overcrowded hospitals would be unable to cope in the event of a significant outbreak of COVID-19.

More than 30,000 nurses and healthcare workers in the New Zealand Nurses Organisation (NZNO) held a nationwide strike on June 9. They are preparing a second eight-hour strike on August 19 after the union leadership cancelled an earlier scheduled strike to present a sellout offer, which nurses overwhelmingly rejected. MERAS members are planning a 12-hour strike on the same day.

More than 5,000 senior doctors are also considering strike action after receiving a zero percent pay increase offer from the country's 20 District Health Boards (DHBs).

MERAS co-leader Jill Ovens told TVNZ on July 15 that low pay was pushing hundreds of midwives to leave the profession and called for "a 50 percent pay jolt." However, this figure was not mentioned in union leaders' speeches outside parliament last Thursday.

"All we're asking for the actual pay increase is to meet the cost of living," Ovens told Radio NZ on

August 9. The official rate of inflation is 3.3 percent, but the actual cost of living, especially for housing, is much higher. MERAS members have already voted to reject a below-inflation offer consisting of just two increases of \$1,200 spread over two years.

Like other healthcare workers, midwives have also been promised a "pay equity" deal, separate from their collective employment agreement. The government and unions say this will significantly increase pay to a level comparable to male dominated professions with similar responsibilities. But the deal is still being negotiated, decades after it was first promised, and it is not clear if it will result in a significant pay increase.

A major concern for striking midwives, like nurses and doctors, is the low level of staffing in hospitals, which places both workers and patients at risk.

In 2019, midwives also went on strike over low pay and deteriorating conditions. One factor in persuading them to settle in April 2019 for a minimal pay increase of about 3 percent per annum, plus lump sums and back-pay, was a "Midwifery Workforce Accord" signed by MERAS and the government. The government made vague promises to improve retention, training and recruitment of midwives.

Since then, however, the staffing situation has become even worse. *Stuff* reported on July 17 that 33 positions in the Wellington region's maternity services are vacant, about one in four jobs. Nationwide, there are about 200 vacancies.

At the rally in Wellington, a number of midwives and supporters addressed the crowd, calling for better pay and staffing. One speaker said her 19-year-old sister earns more working as a barista than a new graduate midwife "who's responsible for lives. We have such huge responsibilities and the pay just does not show that."

A mother declared: “I want to say to Labour, you are losing women on this issue, because women have had enough.” This prompted cheers from the crowd. “We cannot lose another midwife in our community... It is beyond a crisis and we are going to start losing women and babies if you don’t get it sorted,” she said.

A few Labour and Green MPs declared their “support” for midwives, while making no concrete commitments. Health Minister Andrew Little, who was booed when he attempted to address the nurses’ protest in June, told the midwives: “I’m confident we can meet the demands that you’re putting out there” for safe staffing and “pay equity.” He gave no details on either of these issues.

Diana, a midwife with decades of experience, told the *World Socialist Web Site*: “The main issue is that midwives have huge amounts of responsibility, and they don’t have enough money... If we want to attract and keep quality midwives, we’ve got to pay them properly.” After several years outside the profession, she said she had decided to return at the start of the year “because [the hospitals] are so desperate.” She worried about patient safety, saying “it feels like a warzone sometimes.”

Madison, who is studying to be a midwife in Wellington, had joined the protest “to support the workforce that I’m going into. I’ve got two more years until I graduate and I don’t want to be going into a system as broken as this one.”

She is borrowing about \$9,000 a year for her four-year course, and more for living costs, and she expects to finish with a debt of over \$50,000. “Because we’re on call and doing 40-hour weeks in placement some weeks, we can’t work as much as normal uni students would,” she said. The starting rate for midwives is about \$24 an hour—not much more than the minimum wage of \$20.

Because of the staffing shortage, midwives did not have as much time to teach students who were doing their placement, Madison said. Sometimes there was one midwife working with eight or nine women, and nurses were called in to fill the shortages in the maternity ward.

Madison said the government had taken some steps to train more midwives, but she described the government’s pay offer as “insulting.” “Something needs to change. I know that myself and a lot of my

colleagues who are studying aren’t going to stay in New Zealand very long,” she said.

The major obstacle facing workers who are entering into struggles is the union bureaucracy, which seeks to divide workers and to subordinate them to the state and big business. Like other unions, MERAS has close links with the Labour-led government and campaigned for its re-election last year. One of the Labour MPs present at Thursday’s rally was Helen White, MERAS’s former lawyer.

The unions aim to convince workers that the government, which is carrying out major attacks on the working class and starving the healthcare system, can be pressured to make “progressive” reforms. This is a completely bankrupt perspective.

The intensifying struggles by healthcare workers highlights the need for new organisations: rank-and-file committees, politically independent of the unions and every party in parliament. These committees must reject the lie that the government cannot “afford” to fix the crisis in the healthcare system. They would seek to link up healthcare workers with those in public transport, education and other areas who all face low wages, understaffing and deteriorating conditions.

The Socialist Equality Group calls on workers to fight for a socialist program to urgently prepare the healthcare system so it can address existing needs and withstand future outbreaks of COVID-19 and other diseases. The tens of billions of dollars handed over to the rich, in the form of bailouts, quantitative easing and tax cuts, must be redirected to repair crumbling infrastructure, build new hospitals and hire thousands more healthcare workers.



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