

Australia: New South Wales nurses set to vote on statewide strike

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The New South Wales Nurses and Midwives Association (NSWNMA) this week called for a vote on whether to hold a statewide strike on February 15.

In a live Facebook video on Wednesday, Brett Holmes, general secretary of the union, said, while the union “doesn’t recommend industrial action lightly,” the NSW Liberal-National government “has given us no other choice.”

In reality, it is the mounting anger and frustration among health workers over the catastrophic state of the health system amid the surging COVID-19 pandemic that has forced the NSWNMA to call the vote.

In an indication of the high level of support for industrial action among health workers, Reddit user Gorfob reported yesterday that 95.9 percent of their NSWNMA branch had voted in favour of the strike.

Around the country, 4,261 people are hospitalised for COVID-19, with 302 in intensive care. In NSW alone, 2,337 people are hospitalised, with 152 in intensive care. Across Australia 523 people have died from COVID-19 in the past week, including 81 reported today.

While Holmes noted in the Facebook video, “nurses and midwives are now expected to cope with the unprepared consequences of a ‘let it rip’ strategy,” the union issued no demand for a reversal of the murderous policy.

Instead, the proposed strike is deliberately designed to constrain the anger of nurses within the narrow confines of appeals for unspecified improvements to nurse-patient ratios and pay.

Emphasising the narrow focus of the union and its intent to contain the dispute within state borders, the only government mentioned by Holmes was that of NSW Premier Dominic Perrottet.

The reality is, the hospital system in every state faces

a crisis. The criminal reopening drive that has led to mass infection, hospitalisation and death is the policy of the entire Australian political establishment, in line with the demands of big business. This includes Labor, with which the unions collaborate closely, and of which many of their top bureaucrats are party members.

The proposed strike will centre around a protest outside the state parliament, and Holmes said the aim was “to make them listen and urgently address this crisis.”

In fact, the purpose of the strike is to “let off steam” and prevent a broader mobilisation against the increasingly impossible conditions confronting health workers and the entire working class.

The vote is only open to NSWNMA members working in public hospitals with local branches of the union. This excludes whole sections of nurses, including those working in the aged care sector, in which there are currently 525 COVID-19 outbreaks in New South Wales. Across the state, 2,847 aged care residents and 3,720 staff are currently infected. Australia-wide, at least 533 aged care residents have died from the virus since the beginning of the year.

The strike would also exclude doctors, paramedics, orderlies, cleaners, and other hospital workers, who likewise confront the daily threat of infection, illness and death from COVID-19, and who face similar pressure to work long hours with minimal breaks.

Shaye Candish, the assistant general secretary, said the ballot call was prompted by an “overwhelming response” from nurses to a union survey issued the previous week, which “clearly indicated that you supported immediate action being taken now.”

This survey can only be seen as an attempt to head off, or at least delay, the NSWNMA’s reluctant call for statewide industrial action. It means they are effectively

being balloted twice, under conditions in which it was certainly not necessary to gauge the sentiment of nurses, the anger is obvious.

On January 19, around 60 intensive care nurses rallied outside Sydney's Westmead Hospital. On that occasion, Candish admitted there was "broad discussion" of strikes among health workers, but made clear that the union was working to keep its members on the job.

Candish said "right now our members are mostly concerned about getting through this pandemic."

Ahead of the statewide strike, nurses at the Port Macquarie Base Hospital in the Mid-North Coast region of NSW will hold a rally tomorrow over the COVID-19 staffing crisis. President of the hospital's NSWNMA branch, Mark Brennan, made clear that the demonstration was merely to "raise awareness." He said: "It isn't a strike, so nursing staff that are working won't be attending the rally."

As Australia confronted a massive surge in infections, hospitalisations and deaths when the arrival of Omicron was met with the removal of virtually all public health measures to limit the spread of the virus, social media and the corporate press were full of accounts of health workers exposing the immense crisis in the hospital system.

Many were driven to the point of resigning. On Wednesday, Reddit user Pockets7777 wrote: "My last shift working for NSW health is the 13th of Feb. I can't take another year of being treated like a piece of garbage by executives and by politicians who have zero clue what our job entails."

In late December, when the NSW government changed COVID-19 isolation rules for health workers, forcing potentially infectious nurses to return to work, the NSWNMA tacitly endorsed the move. Holmes said: "In the best possible world this change should not have been needed but we have a situation where COVID-19 is compromising our health staff such that the system cannot continue to operate."

Holmes said on Wednesday: "Over the past two years your association has been advocating for your rights relating to personal protective equipment and, since October, a COVID allowance.

Throughout the pandemic, NSWNMA has repeatedly shut down strikes over pay and staffing, and limited industrial action to brief stoppages at individual

facilities.

The call for a statewide strike is a reflection of the growing anger among health workers. But the exclusion of whole sections of health workers and the orientation of the action to making appeals of the very government that caused the crisis makes clear that the union's aim is to control and suppress opposition to the bipartisan "let it rip" policy.

Nurses must take warning from the attempts of the NSWNMA to limit that action as much as possible and its record of collaboration with government throughout the pandemic. Lessons must be drawn from the experience of two previous strikes in June/July 2021, which the union isolated and divided up, while sowing such confusion that many nurses did not know who was striking or when. At a protest last December over conditions, the union only mentioned the pandemic once.

The conclusion that must be drawn is that for even a one-day strike to occur, and for it to be broadened, nurses must begin organising independently of the union, including through the establishment of their own rank-and-file committees. But 24 hours will not resolve the hospital crisis, nor will Perrottet or any other big business politician change course based on plaintive appeals.

What is required is a political movement of healthcare workers and the working class as a whole fighting for a massive expansion of the public hospital system, including pay increases for nurses and all other workers, and a vast increase of staffing to address patient ratios. This must be connected to a struggle for the repudiation of the ruling elite's "let it rip" pandemic policies, and for the elimination of the virus.

Ultimately, the pandemic has demonstrated that the most basic social needs, including to health and life itself, are incompatible with capitalism, a society where everything is subordinated to the profit interests of the corporate elite. The alternative is the fight for a society based on social equality, that is a fight for workers' governments and socialism.



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