

Australia: New South Wales nurses vote for statewide strike

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The New South Wales Nurse and Midwives' Association (NSWNMA) said yesterday a majority of public hospital nurses had voted in favour of statewide industrial action on February 15.

The union was forced to call the ballot last week because it can no longer contain mounting anger from health workers over chronic understaffing, constant overtime, and stagnant wages in the hospital system. These longstanding issues have intersected with the current COVID surge, caused by the "let it rip" policies of Labor and Liberal governments, to create a catastrophe throughout the healthcare system.

Nurses who have spoken out have made plain that their conditions are intolerable. One Sydney nurse explained in an interview with the WSWS yesterday that the situation in her hospital was "like something out of a movie. We sometimes look at each other and are gobsmacked and ask, is this really happening? Do we really have three patients on trolleys in the corridor right now with no beds? What if a medical episode happened with that patient? There is no equipment to use to assist that patient."

Guidelines were constantly changing, undermining the most basic infection controls, the nurse explained. Staff were being pressured to continually commit to overtime. And other essential hospital services were being wound back or cancelled altogether.

The NSWNMA bears central responsibility for the situation. It has signed one sell-out industrial agreement after another, allowing for the chronic understaffing and inadequate pay that nurses confront. The union has collaborated with governments throughout the pandemic and facilitated the profit-driven dismantling of all safety restrictions, which is overwhelming the hospitals.

The union has not held a statewide nurses' strike since July 2013. Over the past two years, the NSWNMA, along with the other health unions, has repeatedly shut down or

refused to call strikes. The union isolated and divided up two stoppages last year, 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 union is preparing a similar operation for February 15 if it does not seek to cancel the strike entirely as in the past.

Only NSWNMA members working in public hospitals with local branches of the union will be able to participate in the industrial action and each branch will decide separately whether to strike and for how long.

The *Sydney Morning Herald* reported yesterday that workers at Royal Prince Alfred Hospital may strike for 24 hours, while Westmead nurses will walk off the job for 12 hours, and at Liverpool and Blacktown hospitals, the action will be limited to 8 hours.

The strike is planned to centre around a protest rally outside NSW Parliament, along with demonstrations in other cities and towns across the state, including Newcastle, Coffs Harbour, Bathurst, Bega, Lismore and Tamworth.

The Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) this morning stated "the whole union movement stands with you," a phrase it trots out whenever the unions are trying to subvert a strike. The ACTU, which claims millions of members, is not intending to mobilise a single one of them in support of the nurses. The reality is, every measure is being taken to divide workers, even within the same industry.

The NSWNMA has explicitly excluded aged care workers under conditions where more than 533 aged care residents died from the virus in the first five weeks of the year, and more than 5,400 residents and 6,500 staff are currently infected.

The Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation yesterday held a protest of aged care workers outside

Parliament House in Canberra which featured a host of Labor politicians and had more to do with electioneering than any effort to improve conditions for aged care staff or residents.

The primary criticism of the federal Liberal-National government was that it had acted too slowly in deploying the military to aged care facilities, which the union said it had been demanding for four weeks. The deployment of the army is being carried out to justify the refusal of governments to boost funding to aged-care, or any aspect of the health system, to intimidate staff and to further a broader turn to authoritarian measures amid widespread popular hostility to the “let it rip” program.

The NSWNMA’s attempts to limit the duration and scope of the February 15 strike are based on the same rotten program of subordinating nurses to the big-business political parties and governments responsible for the crisis in the sector.

The union is directing nurses to plaintively appeal to the right-wing Liberal government of Premier Dominic Perrottet. The administration has been at the forefront of the homicidal “herd immunity” policies, which continue to be deepened, including with last week’s reopening of the schools amid mass infections. Perrottet’s government, moreover, is committed to the pro-business restructuring that the ruling elite demands accompany the “reopening,” including a further onslaught on public healthcare and education.

Yet NSWNMA General Secretary Brett Holmes has politely called upon this very government “to commit to shift-by-shift ratios, decent and fair pay, and a COVID allowance,” and encourages nurses to do the same. To call this a dead end is an understatement.

The NSWNMA has not specified what constitutes a “decent and fair” pay increase, only that it is “more” than the 2.5 percent rammed through by the union in previous years in line with the Labour Expenses Cap introduced by the state Labor government in 2008.

Holmes has bemoaned “nurses and midwives are now expected to cope with the underprepared consequences of a “let it rip” strategy.” The union has not once challenged the dismantling of safety measures. It backed the government’s changes to close contact rules last month, which forced potentially infected nurses to stay on the job. And the NSWNMA still does not call for the reintroduction of lockdowns or any other measures aimed at curbing transmission and thus ending the illness and death that is overwhelming the hospitals.

To the extent that the union opposes the government, it

is from the standpoint of promoting illusions in the opposition Labor Party. But Labor has marched in lockstep with the NSW and federal governments in the “reopening” drive and has directly implemented it in states such as Victoria. Over the past three decades, moreover, NSW and federal Labor governments have presided over the gutting of the healthcare system, no less than their Liberal counterparts.

The aim of the NSWNMA and all of the other unions is to prevent the emergence of a political movement of the working class against the governments and parties responsible for the assault on healthcare and the catastrophic pandemic policies. The union represents the interests of a bureaucracy whose privileges, including substantial executive salaries, are based on the suppression of any struggle by workers in the interests of governments and big business.

The record demonstrates that for the February 15 strike to proceed, and for it to be broadened, nurses must begin to organise independently of the NSWNMA, including through the formation of their own rank-and-file committees. They must reach out to doctors and other health staff for a unified struggle. This should be broadened to teachers, who have been herded into unsafe classrooms, factory and warehouse workers, who have been hit with mass infections, and every other section of the working-class.

The fight for scientifically-grounded pandemic policies aimed at the elimination of the virus, and for decent wages and conditions, is a political struggle that must be directed against capitalism and all of its defenders. The Socialist Equality Party advances a socialist program for the establishment of workers’ governments that would allocate trillions of dollars to public healthcare, including through an end to the massive military expenditure, and the nationalisation of the banks and major corporations under public ownership and democratic workers’ control.

The SEP is holding a public meeting this Saturday, at 4 p.m. (AEDT), aimed at building support for the strike and discussing the issues that it poses. We urge nurses, health workers and other workers and young people to attend the meeting, share your experiences and take part in the discussion.



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