

Thousands of Australian nurses strike in NSW, defying government-court ban

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Tens of thousands of nurses across New South Wales (NSW), Australia's most populous state, walked off the job today in their first statewide strike since 2013. The nurses are demanding staffing increases to address decades-long shortages, an end to a punitive pay cap that condemns them to effective wage cuts, and urgent improvements to their dire working conditions, which have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Significantly, the nurses proceeded with their action despite it being banned yesterday afternoon by the NSW Industrial Relations Commission (IRC), upholding an application by the state Liberal-National Coalition government. The nurses' defiance indicates a growing mood of resistance, not just among nurses and health staff, but throughout the working class.

The government has overwhelmed the hospitals by allowing COVID to spread. At the same time, it has rejected calls for any boost to the chronically-underfunded public health system. In fact, the state has fewer staffed intensive care unit (ICU) beds than at the beginning of the pandemic. Yet the government, and the pro-business IRC, asserted that nurses could not strike because it would "pose a risk to public health and safety" by disrupting medical services.

Several thousand nurses rallied in Sydney outside NSW parliament, while thousands more joined protests in 30 rural and regional centres.

Health workers at the Sydney rally told Socialist Equality Party (SEP) campaigners that COVID had reduced already poor staffing to skeletal levels. One registered nurse said her friend had worked seven 12-hour shifts in a row, and "most nurses didn't get to have a break until they got COVID."

Others said, "We did our absolute best," but they had not been given the necessary support to care for COVID patients who needed ventilators. Patients were

sent instead to regular non-ICU wards, converted to COVID wards. Those wards were always full. One worker said: "One patient would be discharged and two would be admitted. It was constant, and it was like that for months and months."

The clear sentiment was that the situation has reached a breaking point, and a serious fight needs to be taken up.

By contrast, the aim of the NSW Nurses and Midwives Association (NSWNMA) was to limit the action as much as possible, suppress political discussion among nurses and direct them behind plaintive appeals to the NSW Coalition government.

The union only held the strike ballot, having canceled limited industrial campaigns over the previous two years, for fear of an explosion of anger if it did not. Union officials cloistered with government and health department representatives, as late as Monday afternoon in backroom discussions aimed at minimising the action or calling it off entirely.

As it was, the union ensured that nurses walked off at different times at various hospitals. This served to divide them up, in a patchwork of localised actions aimed at preventing any unified mobilisation.

Before the stoppage began, the NSWNMA sent a text message to its members, which stated: "Strike Action will proceed! Pls be aware, other protest groups may attend rallies today. Do not engage, let us focus on ratios. Alert NSWNMA staff if you have any concerns. Only follow NSWNMA social media for events."

This was clearly a reference to the SEP, which has exposed the union's collaboration with the government throughout the pandemic and its manoeuvres to neuter even the one-day strike it was compelled to hold.

The SEP held a successful online public meeting on Saturday, addressed by a health worker in the US and a

Sydney nurse. It called for nurses to establish rank-and-file committees, aimed at unifying all health workers, along with teachers and other sections of the working class, in a common struggle against the “let it rip” pandemic policies and for basic social rights, including a massive expansion of the public healthcare system.

The NSWNMA text starkly revealed the union’s role, effectively asserting its “right” to police discussions among nurses, decide what they may discuss and with whom, and try to ban them from being exposed to any alternative perspectives.

The text foreshadowed the line of the Sydney rally and the other protests, all of which were limited to little over an hour. The issue of staffing ratios was presented outside any broader political or historical context. The issue, which has persisted for years, was depicted solely as a result of the proclivities of NSW Premier Dominic Perrottet, despite him having been installed only six months ago.

Speaking in Sydney, NSWNMA general secretary Brett Holmes made several vague allusions to the pandemic. In his only specific reference to the policies that have resulted in its massive spread, he said Perrottet had proceeded with a “Freedom Day” on December 15, despite the highly-infectious Omicron variant already circulating in the community.

Holmes did not mention that this was part of a national policy, involving all state, territory and federal governments, including those led by the Labor Party. Nor did he give any accounting of the role of the union. At no point has it opposed the “live with the virus” program. In January, the union backed changes to close-contact rules, forcing potentially-infected nurses to remain on the job due to staff shortages.

Holmes and fellow union speakers said nothing about the conditions of other health workers, who face the same plight as nurses. Nor did they mention the fact that the hospital systems are in a near-identical meltdown in every state and territory. To the extent that other states were referenced, it was to falsely claim that conditions for nurses there were better, given the existence of staffing ratios, even though these are not adhered to.

Everything was confined to the issue of Perrottet. Holmes alternated between denouncing the NSW premier and pathetically pleading for him to “come to the table.” If the premier wished to assist nurses, by

mandating and funding ratios, but came up against opposition from the treasury, Holmes advised him to say that such measures would “save money.”

The rallies concluded without any indication of further action, aside from meaningless declarations that the “fight will go on,” and “this is the beginning, not the end.” In reality, the NSWNMA will do everything it can to prevent even further limited strikes.

Above all, the union is seeking to block the only perspective that can advance the interests of nurses and other health staff. That is for the development of a unified political movement of health workers, independent of the unions, and directed against all the official parties, including Labor, which fully supports the reopening drive and has directly implemented health cuts while in office.

Nurses need their own rank-and-file committees, to link up with other health workers, across NSW, the country and internationally, as well as other sections of the working class, such as teachers and warehouse workers, who are also on the pandemic frontlines. The fight for decent wages and working conditions in such sectors is inseparable from a struggle against the official pandemic policies, which are based on the subordination of social need, including health and life, to private profit.

Instead of plaintive appeals to big business governments, what nurses and other workers must take up is the struggle for workers’ governments. These would adopt the scientifically-grounded policies required for the elimination of the virus, while implementing socialist policies, including placing the banks and corporations under public ownership and democratic workers’ control, and directing trillions of dollars to the healthcare system.



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