

VIDEO – Australia: Striking New South Wales nurses speak out

Our reporters
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Thousands of nurses across New South Wales (NSW) walked off the job for up to 24 hours on Tuesday, in their first statewide strike since 2013.

For decades, at the hands of Liberal-National and Labor governments, and with the union as the enforcer, nurses have faced staff shortages, declining wages and increasingly “impossible” conditions, all of which have been sharply worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The following video features two of the striking nurses from Sydney, who described to Socialist Equality Party campaigners the conditions they have endured working in COVID-19 wards during the pandemic.

The strike proceeded in defiance of a shut-down order issued late Monday by the state Industrial Relations Commission. On previous occasions, such last-minute rulings by the anti-worker tribunal have been seized upon by the NSW Nurses and Midwives’ Association (NSWNMA) to cancel industrial action.

On Tuesday, however, the NSWNMA was unable to call off the strike for the same reason it had been compelled to call it in the first place—fear that mounting anger among health workers is becoming impossible for the union to contain.

The NSWNMA limited the strike to a subset of its members working in public hospitals, deliberately excluding many workers, including those in the aged care sector, where at least 711 people have died from COVID-19 this year alone. Despite this, the nurses’ rally in Sydney was joined by workers from other sectors, including off-duty paramedics.

Following the strike, NSW Health said it was considering whether to take action against the union over the strike. In a further indication of the union’s tenuous control over simmering tensions in the workforce, NSWNMA General Secretary Brett Holmes

said such an action would be “very unfortunate.” However, the union has not outlined any firm plans for further industrial action.

The continued hostility of the NSW government led by right-wing Premier Dominic Perrottet towards the nurses only underscores the dead-end perspective advanced by the union. Having denounced Perrottet as solely responsible for the hospital crisis, speakers to the rally begged him to “come to the table” to resolve it.

Nurses and other “frontline” workers cannot carry out a fight for decent wages and conditions outside of a struggle against the murderous “let it rip” policies of Australian state, territory and federal governments, Labor and Liberal-National alike.

What is required is a conscious break with the unions and the Labor Party, which have played the critical role in keeping workers on the job in unsafe conditions throughout the pandemic. This means a fight to build independent rank-and-file committees in every hospital and workplace.



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