

Australia: Expand strike action by NSW nurses! Form rank-and-file committees to break the isolation imposed by the union!

Health Workers Rank-and-File Committee
28 March 2022

Tens of thousands of nurses across New South Wales (NSW), Australia's most populous state, have voted to strike for up to 24 hours on March 31, just six weeks after holding a 24-hour stoppage on February 15, the first statewide strike by NSW nurses in almost a decade.

That the union, the New South Wales Nurses and Midwives' Association (NSWNMA), was forced to call the vote for a second strike is a demonstration of the anger and determination to fight among health workers. As nurses have declared: nothing has changed since February 15!

The nurses' strike last month proceeded in defiance of a ban by the pro-business NSW Industrial Relations Commission (IRC). Once again, the IRC has prohibited the planned strike on March 31.

The Health Workers Rank-and-File Committee warns nurses and health workers that the union could try to either call off the strike or limit it. As with the February 15 strike, only nurses in the public sector who are members of the union were able to vote, and the decision on whether to strike and for how long is left up to individual branches.

The dire conditions facing nurses in NSW are replicated across Australia and throughout the world. The new strike vote is part of a growing fightback by health workers and other sections of workers internationally, with the eruption of strikes and protests. But every effort is being made by the trade unions to isolate these struggles.

This past week alone, NSW Ambulance workers covered by the Australian Paramedics Association (APA) undertook 24-hour industrial action over pay and staff shortages, defying an IRC "recommendation" that the action be called off, while intensive care paramedics in the Health Services Union (HSU) undertook separate action with partial work bans. Paramedics have denounced the limited action by the unions as "pathetic."

Public mental health workers, including nurses, held a statewide strike in Victoria earlier this month, in response to a stalled enterprise agreement (EBA). The action was limited to just three hours by the union.

The health unions have repeatedly rejected calls by their members to unite the industrial action of health workers. They

have blocked any joint mobilisation with other sections of workers, including NSW rail staff, who confront the same pay cap as nurses, as well as teachers, who have been forced by the education unions into COVID-infected classrooms.

This is why health workers must take matters into their own hands through the formation of rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions, fighting against the bureaucracy's attempts to enforce sell-outs and to isolate struggles. Put simply, the only way forward is to break the stranglehold of the corporatised trade unions and to strike out on a new path.

Firstly, NSW nurses must call on all health workers throughout Australia to take action in opposition to the threats of the industrial courts, and the nationwide onslaught on public healthcare, expressed in wage suppression, unbearable conditions and grossly inadequate resourcing.

The trade unions have used the rulings of these pro-business courts for decades to call off planned strikes at the last minute. The NSWNMA was fully prepared to shut down last months' strike, holding backroom talks with government and health representatives late into the afternoon on February 14.

The only reason that the union did not call off the strike was because it feared an explosion of opposition from workers that it would not be able to control.

The NSWNMA is attempting to channel workers' anger and frustration back behind futile appeals to NSW Premier Dominic Perrottet and the state Liberal-National, as well as to the Labor Party.

These are the very governments and parties responsible for the crisis in health! Over decades, Labor and Liberal state and federal governments alike have overseen deepening funding cuts to health and the privatisation of the sector. This assault has been enforced by the trade unions through regressive EBAs and the suppression of strike action.

The situation has been massively worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic. Labor and Liberal-National governments joined together in the "National Cabinet" to lift all safety measures aimed at stopping the spread of COVID-19, in a profit-driven transition to "living with the virus."

NSW Liberal Premier Perrottet has boasted that he and

Victorian Labor Premier Daniel Andrews conspired together to spearhead the ditching of all the restrictions which had successfully suppressed COVID earlier in the pandemic. As Perrottet has declared, he listens to economic advisors not health advice. The same is the case for all of the state and territory leaders, including Andrews and the other Labor premiers.

Together they ensured the massive spread of the virus knowing it would result in infections, illness and deaths. The reopening of schools, central to this perspective, was not based on health considerations. Its sole purpose was to “boost confidence in the economy.”

The trade unions, including the NSWNMA, have not opposed the reckless policy in the slightest, instead serving as the enforcers of the homicidal COVID policies.

Nurses know better than most that it is a lie to declare that the pandemic is over. Since the beginning of 2022, at least 3,654 people have died from COVID-19 in Australia—almost two thirds the total deaths recorded since the pandemic began.

The fight for safe staffing and decent conditions for health workers and their patients is inseparable from the fight to end the pandemic. COVID-19 hospitalisations are again on the rise, as the new BA2 variant sweeps the globe and thousands of health workers are currently in isolation with COVID.

While much of the NSWNMA’s campaign has been focused on the demand for ratios, the situation is no different in the states where there are legislated ratios in place, namely Queensland and Victoria. Both supposedly have mandated a ratio of 1:4, but under conditions of funding cuts, there are still widespread staffing shortages, with increased ambulance ramping and hospitals struggling to cope with the numbers of admissions.

At the February 15 strike rallies, the NSWNMA sought to suppress any political discussion among workers, warning nurses against speaking to “other protest groups.” This was a clear reference to the Socialist Equality Party, the only political tendency fighting to expose the union’s collaboration with the government and raising the need for an independent mobilisation of workers.

The union tries to prevent nurses discussing with other parties, while it calls for an “open dialogue” with the Perrottet government around demands for “nurse to patient ratios” and “a fair pay rise above 2.5 percent... to compensate for [public sector workers’] wage freeze in 2020.” What “open dialogue”? Union-government “negotiations” are always conducted behind closed doors and then presented to workers as a fait accompli they must accept.

The union is speaking of a marginal pay increase under conditions where the rate of inflation is officially at 3.5 percent, but in reality much higher. “Non-discretionary” inflation is at 4.5 percent, meaning the prices of basic goods and services are soaring.

Nurses and health care workers are told there is no money for

wage increases or higher staffing levels but the Morrison government, together with Labor, can find billions of dollars for military spending.

Thousands of people are still homeless after the recent floods and the governments, both federal and state, were nowhere to be seen. A month after the inundation, 120 campervans have been sent to the northern rivers of NSW by the state government. They reportedly cannot be used, however, because they don’t have water or linen. But governments can source, pack and dispatch two shipments of lethal aid to Ukraine, worth more than \$100 million, in a matter of a couple of weeks!

Only one force can stop the war at home and abroad—the united struggle of the international working class. To fight back against the ruling elite’s policy of mass infection and death, and the deepening assault on wages and conditions, health workers must break free from the shackles of the trade unions and take matters into their own hands, through the formation of independent, rank-and-file committees.

Rank-and-file committees can serve as a forum for democratic discussion among nurses and other health workers about all the issues they confront. They can formulate responses to the latest government and hospital management dictates that are in the interests of workers themselves, and function as safety committees in response to the ongoing pandemic, fighting for full PPE, infection controls and other measures to protect health workers.

This is a struggle that can and must be won, but only if there is a break with the union, whose isolation campaign can spell only defeat. The sole way forward is through the unity of the strength of the entire working class in a common struggle against inequality and exploitation, directed against the governments, Labor, the trade unions and the capitalist system they all defend. The Health Workers Rank-and-File Committee urges health workers to contact us today to take up this fight.



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