

Australia: NSW health workers need to break union isolation and fight for unified struggle

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More than 20,000 health workers throughout New South Wales (NSW), including paramedics, pathologists, cleaners and kitchen staff, will walk off the job on Thursday. It will be the first-ever statewide action open to the entire membership of the Health Services Union (HSU).

The workers are calling for an end to the state government's punitive 2.5 percent annual cap on public sector wage increases, and demanding a genuine pay rise to keep up with the rapidly rising cost of living. Over more than two years of the COVID-19 pandemic, NSW health workers have been sluggish with sub-inflationary wage increases of 0.3 percent in 2020 and 2.3 percent in 2021, while facing constant overwork and understaffing, and risking infection, illness and death every day.

The HSU has designed the stoppage to ensure minimal disruption, exploiting the commitment of health workers to their patients. Workers at major Sydney metropolitan hospitals will strike for four hours, while regional staff will walk out for two hours or less, and paramedics will hold a one-hour stopwork meeting, during which they will still respond to emergency calls.

The determination of workers throughout the health sector to fight is clear. Just six days ago, NSW nurses and midwives held their second statewide strike in six weeks. In recent weeks, NSW Ambulance workers covered by the Australian Paramedics Association (APA), intensive care paramedics in the HSU, mental health workers in Victoria, and aged care workers in Tasmania and Queensland, have all taken industrial action over chronic understaffing, constant overtime and declining wages. Earlier in the year, strikes were carried out in NSW and Victoria by workers in aged care, where a recent survey found one in five workers plans to leave the sector within a year.

There is a growing recognition among these workers that a unified struggle of all health workers is required. During last week's strike, one nurse told the *World Socialist Web Site*: "Nurses, healthcare workers, paramedics, we all need to be going out together." Others expressed similar sentiments.

So what prevents unified action by health workers? Clearly, it is the unions, which are doing everything possible to enforce a manufactured separation between sections of workers, ensuring

that their struggles are kept isolated. The timing of the HSU stoppage, one week after the NSW Nurses and Midwives' Association (NSWNMA) walkout, is a striking example.

This segregation is not an accident, a miscalculation or a new development. It has been the role of all the unions over decades, in health and every other sector, to systematically divide, disarm and suppress the working class and police anti-strike laws in order to enforce the demands of capitalist governments and big business.

In a comment revealing the HSU's cynical role in shutting down opposition among workers to the decades-long assault on jobs, pay and conditions in the sector, the union's NSW secretary, Gerard Hayes, said on Sunday he was letting workers "off the leash."

In other words, fearful the fury of workers is becoming uncontrollable, the HSU has called these limited stoppages, constrained to small sections of the workforce, as a means for workers to let off steam and wear themselves out, and to retain the grip ("leash") of the union bureaucracy.

The only way forward for health workers is to break the stranglehold of the unions which have enforced decades of cuts to public health funding, by Labor and Liberal-National Coalition governments alike, through one sell-out industrial award or enterprise agreement after another.

That means workers taking matters into their own hands by forming new organisations of struggle—rank-and-file committees—in every hospital and workplace. These committees, unrestrained by the narrow and nationalist program of the unions, could reach out to health workers across the state, nation and the globe, to mount a unified struggle against the deepening attack on wages, conditions and resources in public healthcare.

Health workers face crucial issues

The upsurge in the class struggle in Australia is emerging most sharply among health workers because they have been the most directly affected by the pandemic, which has brought the

already chronically underfunded public health system to its knees.

All the unions have enforced criminally reckless policies, shutting down strikes over COVID-19 safety and joining forces with business to demand exemptions from public health orders, requiring workers in virtually every industry to remain on the job throughout the pandemic.

In late December, the HSU, NSWMA and Australian Salaried Medical Officers Federation held a behind-closed-doors meeting with NSW Health to hammer out a “protocol” to force potentially infectious health workers who had been exposed to COVID-19 back to work.

The global pandemic has served as a trigger event and an accelerant for already mounting class pressures.

The HSU, along with the rest of the unions, promotes the illusion and the lie that the answer is a Labor government. Federal and state Labor governments would do and have done exactly the same as the Coalition’s NSW Premier Dominic Perrottet and Prime Minister Scott Morrison. Over decades, Labor governments have played a critical role in slashing expenditure on health, education and vital public services.

Health workers who have been worked to a standstill by the spread of COVID-19—the result of the “let it rip” policy of all governments—now face rampant inflation, which renders workers unable to meet their daily needs.

NSW Labor leader Chris Minns is an almost invisible man, so indistinguishable are Labor’s policies from those of the hated Perrottet government. Minns issued a vague promise last week that, if elected, he would “have a decent conversation” with workers and raise public sector wages by “a lot more than 2.5 percent,” in line with inflation. That is double-speak. Official inflation figures massively understate the rapidly rising cost of living, especially for lower-income workers.

Official figures put inflation at 3.5 percent, while the cost of non-discretionary goods and services increased by 4.5 percent. These figures predate the worst of the Omicron surge, the devastating floods in Queensland and NSW and the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Workers already face soaring prices for petrol and basic food items. Some vegetables have increased in price by 75 percent following the floods, while rising global costs for fuel, grains and fertiliser resulting from the US-NATO war are leading to higher prices in every supermarket aisle.

The real agenda was outlined in last week’s Liberal-National federal government budget, which detailed plans for vastly increased military spending, paid for by slashing funding to social services. Despite acknowledging that Australia will continue to face new waves of COVID-19, the government is slashing its annual health spending by \$10 billion to \$105 billion.

Federal opposition leader Anthony Albanese said nothing in his budget reply about the health cut. At the same time, he made clear that the Labor Party is every bit as committed to the

military buildup.

Albanese has pitched Labor to big business as the party best suited to prosecute a stepped-up offensive against the working class. It was Labor governments—led by Hawke, Keating, Rudd and Gillard—in collaboration with the Australian Council of Trade Unions that established Australia’s draconian industrial relations laws as a framework for the stifling of the working class.

The HSU is also promoting illusions that workers can advance their demands for decent wages and conditions through the Fair Work Commission and NSW Industrial Relations Commission (IRC). The union has continually blocked paramedics’ demands for strikes, instead corralling them into a “professional wages case” in the IRC.

In reality, these anti-worker industrial tribunals exist to serve business and government, shutting down industrial action and slashing wages. Both recent strikes by nurses were ruled illegal by the IRC, along with a strike by teachers last December. So fearful of an eruption of the class struggle is the Perrottet government that to date, it has not taken action against the defiant nurses for fear of the opposition it would provoke.

The struggle for decent wages and conditions in health care is inseparable from the fight to eliminate the COVID-19 pandemic and end the escalating drive to World War III. The war that should be fought is against COVID-19. It is a fight that can and must be won, but it requires a unified struggle by the entire working class.

The deepening social crisis is driving growing sections of workers into struggle, particularly in the public sector. In NSW, public school teachers struck last December for the first time in a decade, while rail workers are involved in a protracted dispute that in February saw the state government shut down all Sydney trains for one day in a provocative attack on workers.

Appealing to Labor, the Greens and governments is a fruitless exercise. What is needed is a mass movement of workers against the deepening assault on working-class conditions. This cannot be done within the framework of the unions, which are doing everything in their power to shut down any mass action.

Instead, the SEP calls on health workers to form rank-and-file committees, democratically controlled by workers and completely independent of the unions. These committees will form the basis of the fight for a socialist perspective and for workers’ governments, which would redirect the vast sums devoted to militarism and subsidies for the corporate elite to public health, education, welfare and other crucial areas of social need.



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