

# Striking New South Wales health workers speak out

Our reporters  
8 April 2022

Health Services Union (HSU) members involved in state-wide strike action across New South Wales yesterday spoke with *World Socialist Web Site* reporters in Sydney and Newcastle, an industrial city north of Sydney (see: “Australia: Health worker strikes reveal mounting opposition to union bureaucracy and Labor”).

**Tony**, a wardsperson at John Hunter Hospital in Newcastle, said, “I work with COVID every day. What happens if I catch it and what happens to my family? I’m the money-bringer in my family. My wife doesn’t work, I come to work every day. In the 36 years that I have worked here, I’ve never seen it this bad. If I catch COVID, my family is stuffed.”

Tony said the official speakers had not answered the question he asked at the rally, “Are we going to get this wage rise or not, or are you just going to play around with us?” He also questioned why the bureaucrats had not mentioned COVID-19, “the biggest issue here.”

Referring to the union officials and Labor Party figures at the rally, Tony said, “These people have never worked with COVID, we work with it everyday. I take people from the recovery bays into the ICU into the operating theatres, that’s what I do. You see it, some people wouldn’t believe the work that’s required to protect yourself and others, people are coughing, sneezing all the time. You have got to wear your mask all the time, they can’t even get us decent masks. How much money are these companies making off of all these masks? We’re on the front-line of COVID, but we are not making a cent.”

Speaking on the situation confronting hospital workers, Tony said: “I heard that about a month ago there were 150 people in the hospital off sick with COVID. That was just here. You get sick and you have got barely anyone to help you or care for you. It is

tragic. Every month we have had numerous workers leave who just can’t take it anymore. They are leaving because they are burnt out, they can’t handle it. I know three or four people who have left in the past month alone.”

Tony agreed with the Socialist Equality Party’s call for unified action. He said: “I think we should have just all gone out in one big hit, us, paramedics, nurses, that’s a real struggle. We should have been out today for at least 24 hours, not for four hours.”

“The whole time I have worked here, this hospital has always been three-quarters full, or full. That is what we put up with everyday. Sometimes you get depressed because of the little support that you get. If you take a sick day off, you feel terrible. You feel like you are letting people down. I might get in trouble for saying all of this. These nurses behind me, they have been through COVID so much, they are true, true heroes, they really are, what they put up with, we are heroes but in a different way, we have to come to work and do our job.”

He commented on the situation internationally, “COVID isn’t just a pandemic, this is a massacre. Look at the figures, 500,000 estimated deaths in France, 300,000 estimated deaths in Britain, over 1 million dead in the United States... I reckon this will go on for at least another ten years.”

**Nancy**, a cleaner at Sydney’s RPA hospital with more than 20 years of experience in the health sector, agreed workers throughout the industry should be united. She said: “Everyone is affected. It’s not just the nurses and the doctors, it’s the little people like us, cleaners, porters, ward assistants. Without us, the hospital wouldn’t be running.

“I believe we deserve a pay rise, rather than everything else going up but the wages staying how

they are. It's getting impossible for everyone to afford day-to-day basic things, never mind the luxury of going on holidays or even just spending time with the family."

**Zac**, 27 years old, who has been working as a nurse for 6 months in the operating theatre at John Hunter Hospital, spoke on the difficulties of working on low wages: "0.3 percent pay rise is nothing, the cost of living is ridiculous, even around here, it is really hard to find a place to live. On this type of wage, you can't afford to pay \$500 a week on rent.

"I still have to share a place with someone because I can't afford to get by. I know people who are in their 30s or older who are in shared accommodation. What are you going to do when you have kids and a family? You have to get a bigger place to live. There are no savings, no holidays anymore, it's sad, but that's why we are here."

Zac commented on the situation in other areas of health, "I worked in aged care before this, and I make more money in this job than I did there. It was horrendous. Overworked, underpaid, understaffed. The amount of nurses per patient is ridiculous. It's like you have two nurses dealing with five residents. They have all got to be taken care of, showered, dressed, gotten out of bed, fed. You are on a strict timeline to get all of this done. It's just impossible half the time. It's not enough, it ends up being patient neglect. Things get overlooked because nurses are so overworked.

"The government and some of these facilities don't want to provide funds to get new equipment, like walkers, lifts, swings, we need to replace the older models. It eventually stops working, you can't fix something that comes out broken.

"This situation exists across the board. COVID just made everything more difficult. I was in aged care when the pandemic started, it made it so much harder for the residents. Their mental health matters a lot, they are at a part of their life where they have early stages of dementia, they don't know what is going on. All of a sudden, they don't see their family for six months. It is really sad.

"Most people I know have had COVID. I think people are hoping that COVID becomes a new variant of the flu or that there will be herd immunity, but there is no guarantee that that will happen, we don't know that yet."

**hospital security guard** who wished to remain anonymous said, "I've been here for four years. We don't have enough staff to respond to an emergency in the wards.

"Wherever you work there is a shortage of nurses, at all hospitals I've been at. We're all told that the government appreciates our work, but if you mean that you actually have to back it up with some substance. We need to increase staff ratios and get a pay increase. Nurses are always busy."

Commenting on the unions' refusal to mobilise broader sections of workers in support of the striking nurses, he said, "by doing that you are essentially stripping the rights of workers to have a voice."

**Virginia**, a support services officer from Royal North Shore Hospital, said, "I'm here to support everyone in the hospital. Our nursing and medical staff, with the issues with pandemic, treat all patients equally. But the government is not treating us equally. We deserve more.

"I went to the nurses' strike last week and walked with them. We are here for all workers. Some of our colleagues are really tired and are walking away from this career. They fear the virus, for them and their family. It is scary.

"It would be nice if we were all united, that is true. We are not because of government laws. The government makes the rules, but we get hurt first. There are also casuals that are worried about not getting paid. I am not sure why they are not calling for unified action, I am sure everyone would get out there."



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