

10,000 New Zealand healthcare workers prepare to strike

Tom Peters
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On May 9, some 10,000 workers in New Zealand’s public healthcare system began two weeks of work-to-rule industrial action. This limited action includes a ban on all overtime and on working during breaks. The Public Service Association (PSA) members are also preparing to hold a 24-hour strike on Monday May 16, after last minute negotiations failed to avert it.

The allied health workers are employed in dozens of professions, including anaesthetic technicians, audiologists, occupational therapists, dental technicians, social workers and physiotherapists, and workers who process COVID-19 tests.

They are demanding increased pay and better conditions, especially safe levels of staffing, and an end to gruelling workloads. The PSA has been in contract negotiations with the District Health Boards (DHBs), which manage the public health system, since September 2020. In February, the union rejected an offer of pay increases ranging between \$1,800 and \$4,200 over a 27-month term—which would not have kept pace with inflation.

The soaring cost of living is driving workers into struggle, as is the case internationally. New Zealand’s annual inflation rate is 6.9 percent, while in the 12 months to March wages on average increased by only 3 percent—in other words, workers have had a pay cut of 3.9 percent.

Many allied health workers earn little more than the minimum wage of \$21.20 per hour. A PSA press release last month quoted a sterile services technician, Steve, who had been forced to take on a second job to make ends meet. “There is nothing to encourage us to stay in our work and we are constantly short-staffed due to people leaving for higher-paying jobs at places like Bunnings and KFC,” he said.

A dental assistant, Raewyn, told *Stuff* that she had

been forced to rely on charity to survive. Despite 16 years of experience, she made just \$25.50 an hour. “It’s demoralising, it’s demeaning, it’s... embarrassing. It makes me feel like a lower-class citizen... not worthy enough to be paid properly,” she said.

Healthcare has been underfunded and under-resourced for decades, and has been pushed to the breaking point by the COVID-19 pandemic. The Labour Party-led government has lifted most public health restrictions, allowing the virus to spread largely unimpeded. The country’s COVID death toll has soared from 59 at the end of last year to more than 900.

Thousands of people have missed out on essential treatment as hospitals have been flooded with COVID patients, and large numbers of hospital workers have caught the virus. According to official figures, 27,000 people have been waiting longer than four months for surgery—three times the number before the pandemic.

This week, Wellington Hospital reported that it is about 90 percent full on any given day. According to *Stuff*, “nursing vacancies in Wellington had almost doubled in 12 months, sitting at 450 in March,” or 15 percent of the workforce.

The 10,000 allied health workers had previously voted to hold two 24-hour strikes in March, but the PSA called off the actions after they were banned at the last minute by the Employment Court. The court’s extraordinary intervention pointed to the increasingly anti-democratic measures being used by the state to suppress any movement in the working class against the government’s austerity measures.

The government will once again be relying on the union to limit the impact of the strike as much as possible, if it cannot be called off. The ruling elite undoubtedly fears that a powerful nationwide strike could set an example for other workers in the

healthcare sector, and the entire working class, which is being made to bear the burden of the worsening economic crisis.

The unions have worked to keep the allied health workers separate and isolated from parallel disputes involving 30,000 nurses and healthcare workers, who went on strike in June 2021. There is considerable anger among nurses over the government's so-called "pay equity" deal with the New Zealand Nurses Organisation (NZNO), which does not keep pace with living costs and fails to address the crisis in public hospitals.

Despite the rank-and-file opposition to the agreement, NZNO leader Paul Goulter insisted to *Newshub* on May 10 that "there won't be and can't be any strikes about this." Instead, the union appealed to the state's Employment Relations Authority (ERA) to resolve the dispute.

Similarly, in an attempt to call off the May 16 strike, the PSA had urged the DHBs to adopt the recommendations of the ERA, which were made after the cancellation of the strike in March, to settle the dispute. The recommendations have not been made public and PSA members are being kept in the dark about what the union and DHBs are discussing.

PSA organiser Will Matthews told Radio NZ on May 9 that the strike action "can all be called off tomorrow if the DHBs get us an offer today" based on the ERA's proposal. On Friday, the PSA rejected a last-minute offer from the DHBs, saying it disregarded the ERA's recommendations.

Matthews told *Newshub*: "Several Government Ministers have said publicly that they saw a resolution to the dispute through the recommendations of the Authority." This indicates that the secret proposed deal from the ERA is a sellout that will maintain the government's austerity measures.

The Socialist Equality Group warns that no confidence can be placed in the trade unions to undertake a real fight for decent wages and conditions. The PSA, having presided over stagnant wages for years, has dragged out the latest pay negotiations for 18 months while preventing workers from fighting back.

The unions have helped to create the unprecedented crisis in hospitals by supporting the Ardern government's criminal decision to reopen schools and non-essential businesses this year and let COVID-19

tear through the country, killing hundreds of people and making thousands more sick.

The unions represent a well-heeled, middle class bureaucracy, which supports the Labour Party, and is wedded to the capitalist system. The PSA, New Zealand's largest union, collected over \$30 million in revenue last year alone, mostly from membership dues, of which more than \$16.5 million was spent on officials' salaries. The union also owns \$22.48 million in shares and bonds. Just \$1 million was set aside for an "industrial fund."

The situation facing workers calls for a rebellion against the unions and the formation of new workers' organisations, independent of the Labour Party and the whole political establishment. The SEG advocates for building rank-and-file committees in hospitals, laboratories and other healthcare workplaces.

These committees, controlled by workers themselves, would need to forge links with other sections of the working class—in New Zealand and internationally—to organise a political and industrial fight against austerity, and for a fully-resourced policy to eliminate COVID-19 and save thousands of lives.

The source of the relentless assault on the health care nurses is the deepening crisis of the capitalist system itself. A political fightback by health care workers needs to be based on a socialist program. The demand must be raised for tens of billions of dollars to be redistributed from the rich and big business to rebuild and expand the healthcare system, and to provide high-paying jobs for all workers.



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