

Australia: Striking NSW public sector workers call for united struggle against wage cap

Our reporters
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Thousands of public sector workers walked off the job yesterday across New South Wales (NSW), Australia's most populous state. The striking workers are demanding a pay rise above the rapidly increasing rate of inflation and an end to the punitive cap that has locked in stagnant or declining wages for more than a decade.

The 2.5 percent annual cap on wage increases, devised by the NSW Labor government in 2008 before being implemented by the Liberal-Nationals in 2011 and enforced by the unions ever since, was also a central issue in recent mass strikes by nurses and teachers, as well as in ongoing industrial action by rail workers. Despite this, all of the unions involved have kept these disputes isolated and limited to single-day strikes designed to let off steam.

As part of the 24-hour strike, around 1,500 workers rallied outside the NSW parliament in Sydney, while hundreds more attended events in Newcastle and other regional centres across the state.

As in all the recent disputes, union bureaucrats addressing the Sydney rally alternated between falsely portraying the NSW Liberal-National government as solely responsible for the wage cap and dire conditions confronting public sector workers, and issuing plaintive appeals for Premier Dominic Perrottet for improved pay and conditions.

The futility of such appeals was sharply expressed on Monday, with Perrottet's announcement of a temporary increase of the wage cap to 3 percent, far below the official inflation rate of 5.1 percent.

The PSA speakers also promoted the illusion that workers can advance their struggle at the ballot box, with a vote for Labor in the March 2023 state election. The purpose of this is to persuade workers that nothing can be done outside of the parliamentary framework and shut down any more industrial unrest in anticipation of a change in government.

In fact, NSW Labor leader Chris Minns has refused to commit to ending the pay cap and declared his support for "productivity-based bargaining," in which workers will be forced to trade away hard-won conditions in exchange for any increase in pay. This is entirely in line with the austerity agenda of the newly-elected federal Labor government, which is demanding that workers make "sacrifices" as it opposes an "across-the-board" increase in wages to match inflation.

PSA General Secretary Troy Wright took this bankrupt

perspective a step further, promoting the Shooters, Fishers and Farmers Party, which yesterday moved a bill in the NSW Senate "essentially asking for the public sector remuneration cap to be repealed." The parliamentary maneuver is destined to fail, while the Shooters are an extreme right-wing outfit that has closely collaborated with state governments in the assault on social spending as well as workers' pay and conditions.

Socialist Equality Party campaigners intervened at the Sydney and Newcastle rallies, holding discussions with a number of participants.

At the Sydney rally, WSWs reporters spoke to Damian, who works in the Health Care Complaints Commission for the NSW government. "There is a practice of squeezing workers and not resourcing despite ever-higher demands for the services we provide.

"There's no rush on the part of management to fill vacancies when they arise. The impact is that it puts all the staff under relentless and increasing pressure to produce more and do a volume of work that's essentially impossible," he stated.

Damian lamented "the draconian restrictions on the capacity of workers to organise. I think it's been a bipartisan push since the 1980s," he said.

Asked why he thought the unions had enforced the pay cap by refusing to call a strike for more than ten years, he said: "I think they see themselves as being part of the system and that's the environment they are obliged to operate in."

Damian said a fight to secure better conditions "has to be something that comes from the workers themselves. They have to see the need to organise and they have to be prepared. Maybe things have to get so bad that people see no alternative, but to stand up and find the courage of their convictions."

Rebecca, who works in a head office role in out of home care, said: "Last year we had a restructure and we lost 40 percent of our staff. Our job is to support the case workers and non-government workers. We need to be able to respond to their inquiries and given the significant cuts and the increasing work demands, we're not able to do that work.

"I am also here today because I recognise the fact that those people working directly with families are not on a great wage. They do demanding and complex work. They need to be properly

compensated for that work. The cost of living is rising and our wages are going backwards. I think workers are demoralised. They don't feel valued and they're leaving."

Asked why the union had not called industrial action for a decade under conditions of a wage cap, she said, "I think the government has made it very difficult for the union to take action. As we know, there's only very narrow circumstances in which we can take industrial action. Those laws are unjust."

After WSWs reporters explained that these laws were implemented by the Labor government of Kevin Rudd, Rebecca said: "That's appalling. Labor has betrayed us and betrayed the workers. It is on the neo-liberal agenda, the same as the Liberal government."

Adam and Nick, IT workers in the Department of Communities and Justice, told WSWs reporters they were doubtful the 5.2 percent wage increase put forward by the PSA would be enough to keep up with the rapidly rising cost of living.

Nick said: "Everything is going up. Electricity is going up 18 percent, so even with 5.2 percent, I wouldn't be confident that I'd be able to live to the same standard in 12 months' time."

"I do love my job working for the department, but the private sector is paying \$30,000 to \$50,000 more per year for the same kind of jobs. A lot of people have picked up and left."

Adam said: "Corporate profits are rising, wages need to rise along with that."

The two did not believe that the crisis confronting workers could be resolved through elections. Nick said: "Right now, Labor might be the lesser of two evils, but we're stuck between a rock and a hard place."

The pair were critical of the divisive role of the unions covering workers involved in recent strikes. Nick said: "I think everyone should get together, not just our little part of the bubble. Everyone needs to stand united and shutdown the government all in one day."

"In a previous job for a different government department, I always found that the top union reps always had first choice on the good jobs. I think they were in management's pockets. It sounds like things haven't changed across the other part of the PSA."

A finance worker for the Department of Communities and Justice in Newcastle said: "I have been on the job for seven-and-a-half years and I have never seen a single real pay increase. The accumulated inflation over the past seven years has been way over 25 percent. The pay increase that we get of 2.5 percent every year for seven years doesn't meet that inflation rate."

"The union is asking for 5.2 percent. To fight inflation, we are at least going to need a 7 percent increase in our wages. Prices have just gone up and up."

"I haven't taken any annual holidays in the past two years. All the benefits that we had like 'flexibility' are apparently there but we never even get the opportunity to use that."

"There is this illusion that once you have a government job, it is a job you get to keep for life. That's not true. You could be made redundant at any time. Gone are the days where you have jobs for life."

"When I was part of Hunter New England District, they used to cut our budget every single year, to the tune of at least 10-12 percent and we had to operate with less resources."

"A lot of work in government is partly contracted out now as well. We were an 18-member team when we started out, we are now down to 12, because one-third of the contractors have been let go. The problem is, we are still doing the same amount of work, with less people."

"The teachers, health care workers have all gone out on strike at completely different times. We need a unified voice, obviously. If we can combine our strikes, that would make sense."

Jan, a teachers' aide, told WSWs reporters at the Newcastle rally: "We've worked all through COVID, and we want pay equity across the board, and for teaching staff as well. Perrottet's announcement of 3 percent is a band-aid solution."

"Someone said it was interesting that there is this \$3,000 one-off payment for nurses only and that everyone else should get it too. But it's like what they did with the one-off payment in aged care, like a pat on the head or throwing a treat. \$3,000, what's that even going to do? Pay a couple of bills and then it's gone!"

"I would say that we haven't had a single week where we haven't had a staff member away with COVID. Schools remain open now but it's hard, some schools can't get casuals at all and that's when classes collapse. COVID is still ongoing, it's still present—kids are getting it and so are staff."

"A lot of the students we work with have disabilities and we can't not be in a classroom. Different ideas have been thrown around, like that if teachers aren't there because they're sick, they could teach remotely while we supervise, but that's not our role and we actually can't do that legally, we always need a teacher in the classroom."

"If we could unify the different strikes of workers, that would be amazing. When we have days like this, everyone should be able to come out."

Another teachers' aide, who asked to remain anonymous, said: "We are here because we need to stand together, workers need to stand together, nurses, firemen, teachers, all of us."

"The recent increase in inflation is going to impact us greatly. Have you seen the price of food lately? \$4 for a lettuce, it's ridiculous, \$15 a kilo for broccoli and \$23 a kilo for capsicum!"

"Those in the government get pay rises, they're sitting pretty, while we're the ones who are struggling. We're the ones trying to put food on the table for our kids, or putting a roof over our heads, paying mortgages, paying health insurance, paying rent."

Another worker commented: "Now that we don't have bulk-billing much anymore, we are paying \$85-\$90 for the doctor's time. So that's got to come out of our pockets as well."

"Inflation has gone up 5.1 percent, but that will go up even higher again and again, they are only giving us 3 percent, and that isn't until next month!"



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