Australia: More than 130,000 New South Wales nurses and teachers to strike next week

Martin Scott
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Some 140,000 health workers and educators will take strike action across New South Wales (NSW) next week. This includes more than 50,000 nurses and midwives and 70,000 public school teachers across the state, as well as around 18,000 Catholic systemic school teachers throughout NSW and the Australian Capital Territory.

The health workers will stop work on Tuesday, while public and Catholic school teachers will hold a joint strike on Thursday.

The workers are striking against a public sector pay cap, which limits annual wage increases to 3 percent, under conditions where the official inflation rate is 5.1 percent and is tipped to reach 7 percent by the end of the year.

The stoppages are also directed at increasingly intolerable conditions, with both the health and education sectors confronting massive staff shortages and overwork. While these problems are longstanding, workers have been brought to breaking point by the COVID-19 pandemic. Hospitals are completely overwhelmed, while classes are routinely being cancelled or combined, with hundreds of students being herded into school halls and libraries due to the lack of staff.

Nurses are calling for minimum shift-by-shift nurse-to-patient ratios, while teachers are seeking a reduction in the unpaid work they are expected to do, which currently sees educators routinely working more than 60 hours per week.

For health workers and public sector teachers, this will be the third strike in recent months, while the Catholic educators’ action follows a one-day stoppage on May 27. Next week’s actions also follow a 24-hour strike by tens of thousands of NSW public sector workers on June 8. In every case, workers have defied rulings banning the strikes by the NSW Industrial Relations Commission (IRC).

Both the NSW Nurses and Midwives Association (NSWNMA) and NSW Teachers Federation (NSWTF) had deferred further strikes until after Tuesday’s state budget announcement, despite the demands of workers for further action.

The unions have dropped out of these disputes for months, limiting industrial action to occasional one-day strikes designed to allow workers to let off steam and prepare them to reluctantly accept a sell-out deal. Throughout, both unions have advanced the dead-end perspective that workers’ issues could be resolved through appeals to the Liberal-National state government.

The bogus character of this was exposed in Tuesday’s budget, which confirmed the government’s refusal to implement nurse-to-patient ratios, address the workload of teachers, or agree to even the meagre pay demands advanced by the unions.

The NSWTF and Independent Education Union (IEU) are calling for pay rises of just 5.1 to 7 percent per annum, far below the real cost of living, and just two hours of additional preparation time per week. The NSWNMA has called for an increase of only 4.75 percent a year, already beneath the official rate of inflation.

The unions have also promoted false illusions that the election of a state Labor government next year will result in better pay and conditions for workers. This has been starkly exposed by the actions of the newly-elected federal Labor government. Within days of taking office, Labor traded its election promise of a “better future” for demands that workers make “sacrifices.” It has opposed calls for any across the board wage increases, and has made clear that even minor pay rises, below the rate of inflation, will need to be paid for through “increased productivity.”

While striking workers at the previous rallies have called for unified action against the public sector wage cap, the unions are desperately seeking to isolate the struggles. This was clearly demonstrated by the NSWNMA calling next week’s stoppage for Tuesday, deliberately preventing joint action with teachers.

The NSWTF, which covers public school teachers, and the IEU, which covers non-government educators, were compelled to call a joint strike, for fear that rising anger among educators would escape their control. This is the first time in more than two decades that public and Catholic school educators will take industrial action together.

While this is a significant development, as long as the teachers’ struggle remains within the framework of the unions, this show of solidarity will not prevent this dispute from ending as another in a long line of betrayals by the bureaucracy.

Developments in Victoria are a warning of what is being prepared in NSW. In that state, through a campaign of misinformation and censorship, the Australian Education Union (AEU) this month rammed through a sell-out deal, with pay rises of less than 2 percent per annum, and no measures to address teacher workload or the ongoing threat of COVID-19.

Following strikes by public school teachers in December and May the NSWTF pledged to enforce bans on further action for the duration of each school term. On June 14, union president Angelo Gavrielatos feigned surprise that this “good faith” gesture had extracted no concessions from the state government.

Instead, Premier Dominic Perrottet’s government launched legal
The unions will not be able to bring the mounting anger and concern in the government and the ruling elite more broadly that Perrottet’s increasingly desperate manoeuvres reflect mounting of living. The increased fines and denunciations are the latest in a string of measures adopted by the NSW government to try to diffuse the growing wave of industrial action.

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While the health unions hailed the announcement as a “huge win,” workers were quick to recognise this for what it was—a pitiful sop for frontline health workers that does not come close to making up for years of real wage cuts and a pay freeze implemented in 2020, or keeping pace with the rapidly rising cost of living. Perrottet’s increasingly desperate manoeuvres reflect mounting concern in the government and the ruling elite more broadly that the unions will not be able to bring the mounting anger and frustration of workers under control. The fact that the educators’

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