

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

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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 dragged out 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 NSWNA 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

action against the NSWTF, arguing in the Supreme Court that the union must be fined for proceeding with the strikes despite the IRC ban.

The NSWNMA is continuing to isolate health workers. As with the two previous strikes by nurses and midwives, Tuesday's action will be limited to only those working in public hospitals, excluding those employed in the private sector or aged care.

NSWNMA hospital branches have again undertaken separate votes, meaning most workers will stop work for only a few hours, while others will not strike at all. Workers at Liverpool and Bankstown hospitals will strike for 24 hours, at Westmead, Blacktown, Campbelltown and Royal Prince Alfred for 12 hours, while most others will stop work for just 4 hours.

According to the NSWNMA, 16 branches voted for industrial action but will not strike "due to severe staffing shortages and a commitment to life-preserving care." In other words, in areas where the hospital crisis is most acute, the union is letting the government off the hook.

While previous strikes by nurses have involved mass rallies across NSW, Tuesday's action is billed as a "Special General Meeting," to be streamed live from Sydney Town Hall. The clear intention of the union is for this to be a far smaller event than the previous strikes, to demoralise workers and pave the way for a "compromise" with a state government that has made abundantly clear it will not offer workers a genuine pay rise or address any of their other demands.

The continued suppression by the unions of calls by nurses and teachers for a broader, sustained mobilisation has created the conditions for the NSW government to go on the offensive against workers.

Today, the NSW government announced that fines for unions carrying out strikes in contravention of the IRC would be increased more than fivefold to \$55,000 for the first day, and \$27,500 for each subsequent day. As is currently the case, the fines would be doubled if a union had previously been penalised.

At a press conference this morning, Perrottet declared: "These are illegal strikes and if the union bosses conduct illegal strikes... then they should be hit with the largest fines possible."

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.

On June 6, Perrottet announced a temporary increase of the pay cap covering all public sector workers from 2.5 percent to 3 percent, as well as a one-off \$3,000 "appreciation payment" for full-time health workers. The clear purpose of this was to divide workers and prevent a joint struggle throughout the public sector.

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'

unions have reluctantly called joint action is a sign that they are equally worried.

Anger and frustration alone is not enough however. Workers must reject the suppression and isolation of the unions, and fight for a broader mobilisation of the working class, beginning with the NSW public sector. The NSW government is the largest employer in the country, with more than 413,000 staff. A unified struggle by these workers would represent a powerful counter-offensive against the deepening assault on wages and conditions.

This requires the formation of rank-and-file committees in every hospital and school, completely independent of the unions. This is the mechanism through which workers can reach out to their class brothers and sisters throughout the public sector and more broadly and take up a unified struggle for real wage increases and decent, safe conditions for all workers.

This cannot be separated from a fight to eliminate the COVID-19 pandemic, which, despite the silence of governments, the unions and the corporate media, continues to infect 30,000 Australians and kill 50 every day.

Above all, this is a political fight, against the Coalition and Labor, which are in complete agreement on the pandemic and the necessity for a deepening of the onslaught on jobs, wages and conditions, as well as the unions, which will act as the eager servants of government and big business to enforce these attacks. Everywhere, the working class is being forced to pay for the deepening crisis of the capitalist system, while governments, Labor and Liberal, protect the profits of the banks and corporations and the wealth of the billionaires.

This situation poses directly the need for an alternative socialist perspective. Fully-funded, high quality health and education systems, with decent pay and conditions for all workers, require nothing less than the reorganisation of society to meet social needs, not the profit interests of a tiny corporate and financial elite.



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