Australian health workers support NSW nurses strike, call for united struggle

Our reporters
26 June 2022

Health workers across Australia spoke to the WSWS over the weekend in support of New South Wales (NSW) nurses who will strike tomorrow. Some 140,000 health workers and educators will take strike action across this week, including more than 50,000 nurses and midwives.

The trade unions are continuing to isolate workers' struggles, with the NSW Nurses and Midwives Association (NSWNMA) holding the strike two days before the teachers' stoppage. The union had excluded nurses in the private sector and aged care, as well as health workers in other states, who face the same assault on their pay and conditions.

In their comments, health workers call for a united struggle with NSW nurses. The SEP is fighting for the formation of independent, rank-and-file committees, controlled by workers themselves, to take forward this demand and to allow democratic discussion to formulate demands based on what workers actually need (see: "Striking NSW teachers and nurses must fight for unified struggle").

The WSWS is continuing to gather statements of support for the strikes by health workers and teachers. To add your voice, please write to sephw.aus@gmail.com.

Sam, a pathology worker in Victoria

I support the NSW nurses' courageous strike action to fight for resources, wages and conditions that will allow them to continue to do their job. They are not alone; the situation NSW nurses are facing is universal. Health workers in Victoria are facing the same conditions as in NSW.

We are understaffed, underpaid, risking our lives. There are days when I have to do everyone's job because we have colleagues who are away sick, not just with COVID, but with other illnesses as well. There are no replacements.

In every state there is the question of short staffing of nurses and inflation which is cutting into wages. The pandemic has hit everyone, no one is escaping from it. The NSW teachers' strike is also affected by this. The conditions that confront workers in health, in education, in every industry is that our lives are being put at the altar of profit.

If it wasn't for the *World Socialist Web Site*, I wouldn't know what was going on in NSW. There is no coverage at all, no word at all from the union here. Not only that, there is no discussion at all of our conditions, of inflation rising and everything else. We're struggling.

With our last Enterprise Agreement with the union, we voted for industrial action, but with the pandemic a deal was just pushed through without any action.

The unions are deliberately trying to keep us from uniting with the NSW workers. In NSW, nurses are told that Labor premier Daniel Andrews is doing a great job in Victoria and NSW Premier Perrottet is to blame. But in both states, Andrews and Perrottet have worked together to implement the policies of the corporations—funding cuts, wage freezes and impossible conditions. They worked hand-in-glove to reopen schools during the pandemic.

Year after year you see funding cuts and entitlements that we used to get as health care workers disappear. The conditions kept getting negotiated away. The trade unions have played a role in cutting the conditions of the working class. The question becomes—what do we do about it?

The nurses taking strike action is the beginning of a struggle by the working class and we should fight to expand that. The ruling class wants to suppress any strike. They are amassing a fortune, but they want us to pay for it. We can't go through the trade unions or the Labor Party. We need a new organisation. The only way is for workers to organise themselves outside of that trade union framework and begin to look internationally. We are an international class.

Conah, a hospital worker in Victoria

I'm very proud of the nurses in NSW for continuing their action. It is very well needed and it also sparks a light for health workers in other states.

We're always badly treated by the government; we're given wage increases which are under inflation. I think nurses are doing such a great job, and they are doing it till they get what's needed—increased staffing, a long-term plan. I hope I see that happen here in Victoria.

In Victoria the conditions are just as bad, and in most other states I have heard as well. We currently have no recruitment, and with personal leave, COVID or other reasons there are many people off, so there is a huge shortage of workers. And people who are left are expected to fill in those gaps. We're not adequately paid, after four years of an enterprise agreement the wages and conditions are worse in the hospital. I can say that

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people are constantly overworked. People are having to be on call more often and people are having to work weekends more often, and so there is a big mental health crisis that is happening in the health care sector too.

No one wants to come into the health care sector and people are leaving. There is a huge shortage of skills, a huge shortage of seniors, a shortage of resources too, even the most basic resources that we need in the hospital. Basic consumables can take weeks to get, you have to ration, or find other things you can do to give just basic patient care.

The Victorian Labor government had a wage cap of two percent for us, and they decreased that to 1.5 per cent. In NSW they are going to have three per cent, so that is double what I am getting, and it's still under the rate of inflation.

The Labor government, I feel that what they are doing, is trying to make it look as though they are doing something, and trying to plaster over a huge haemorrhage. It is not really helping at all. This $3,000 one off payment they are giving health workers doesn't deal with the real problem. It is just a political façade that they are doing something, but they are not really helping us with a long-term plan, actually giving us a fair wage increase, actually giving us the needed resources. The Labor government is not doing what's needed.

Kathryn, an enrolled nurse at a NSW private hospital

As an enrolled nurse working in the private sector, I fully support the public sector nurses striking on Tuesday and absolutely condemn the NSWNMA for restricting strike action to public sector nurses only.

Nurses in both sectors face exactly the same conditions, dangerously low staffing levels and rejection of pay demands of a 5 percent a year increase, which itself falls below the rising inflation rate.

Due to low staffing levels, nurses are being forced to take on extra duties, including overtime, often unpaid. This is extremely exhausting and absolutely stretching us to the extreme.

This has all been overseen by the union for decades, increasing under conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic. This highlights the need for nurses and all health workers to take things into our own hands. We are the only ones best placed to look after our own interests and the safety of our patients.

That's why I think the formation of independent rank-and-file committees is absolutely essential, in all sectors of work, uniting workers from all professions and industries.

David, a clinical scientist from a large NSW public hospital

I am in full support of the striking nurses. I know exactly why this is needed and they will have a larger group of other staff in hospitals who support them, but the unions have not reached out to us to help the nurses protest. I am perplexed in the same week as teachers striking and now rail workers protesting the same working conditions, that we are not all out together. This would certainly change things and bring more people into the struggle.

This is one of the toughest years I have had in my working life as far as workload is concerned. I am now working most weekends to meet the demands of managing the service as the need to see more patients increases and we have no extra staff for this. This has been compounded by staff getting ill from COVID and now influenza, and I have had to cover staff who have fallen ill.

I think the need for rank-and-file committees is self-evident. What is clear is the unions are fracturing what could be a mass protest of workers joining forces in struggle. This needs to be overcome through organisation and I don't see the unions playing that role. Workers need to get together, understand the situation, share information and broaden the struggle against the current crisis that is only going to worsen.

An administration officer from a regional NSW hospital

I feel the situation is like a bonfire waiting for a spark. I work at a COVID screening desk. Every week I am asked to do more, or longer shifts as other workers call in sick. I work alone in this role except for one hour overlap when the relieving worker arrives. When I started, the desk always had two workers at all times, one nurse and myself.

The hospital is the busiest I've ever seen. There are so many clinical staff furloughed due to COVID or flu, that all nursing staff have been taken off other duties to return them to the wards. The emergency department is full all the time, with over twenty beds constantly occupied , and patients can't be transferred to the wards, because they're full too.

A representative from the Nurses Association came out to the hospital last week, the first one I've seen in almost a year working there. She told me there would be a stop work meeting this Tuesday to discuss further action, but didn't tell anyone about the strike.

All the workers in my hospital, all of whom are facing the same conditions, are deliberately isolated from one another. Wardies and cleaners are in the Health Services Union and are not involved in the action this week. Imagine if workers went out together, with a clear perspective of overthrowing the system, i.e., capitalism, that is responsible for these conditions?

Healthcare workers around the world are facing the same issues. It is absolutely criminal what is being done to healthcare workers, literally, but the coverage of international struggles on the WSWS demonstrates the willingness to fight and the need for an international struggle.

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