

Australia: NSW nurses stopwork meeting highlights union efforts to isolate workers

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A stopwork action involving nurses across New South Wales (NSW) yesterday underscored the desperate campaign of the NSW Nurses and Midwives Association (NSWNMA) and other unions to divide workers up and suppress discussion of the political issues they confront.

The stopwork was nominally the third state-wide stoppage involving nurses, who have been in a dispute for more than six months with the state Liberal-National government over a new industrial agreement.

At each of the first two strikes, in February and March, the NSWNMA sought to prevent a unified mobilisation by calling a confusing patchwork of stoppages at different public hospitals. They were kept entirely separate from other health workers, who also struck in April.

The first nurses' strike nevertheless included a rally in the centre of Sydney, as did the second, though with a smaller attendance. At both, the union appealed to the state's extreme right-wing Premier Dominic Perrottet to come to the "negotiating table," while promoting illusions in the opposition Labor Party.

This line is clearly wearing thin among nurses, as is the union's limitation of action to sporadic one-day stoppages. Nurses who spoke with the WSWs yesterday agreed that there should have been unified action with the state's public sector teachers, who are striking on Thursday, and rail workers, who are holding a partial stoppage on Friday.

The union's claims that its limited strikes would "pressure" the state government to reverse course have been completely refuted. Under conditions of a breakdown of the hospital system, with massive understaffing and soaring workloads, the Perrottet government's budget last month provided nothing to alleviate the crisis. It rejected calls for a mandatory ratio of four patients to one staff member.

Perrottet claimed that his government would hire 10,000 new health workers over the next four years, including 3,000 nurses. There is no indication of where these will come from or how they will be deployed. Even if the number were met, it would barely maintain the chronic crisis, which has been seriously aggravated by the unchecked COVID-19

pandemic.

The budget included a 3 percent cap on annual wage increases, when official inflation is already 5.1 percent and predicted to reach 7 percent this year.

Similar policies are being instituted in every other state, including by Labor-led administrations, and by the federal Labor government. The bipartisan aim is to make the working class pay for the deepening crisis of capitalism and the massive handouts to big business during the pandemic.

In other words, nurses, health staff and the working class as a whole face the need for a struggle against the entire political establishment.

Desperate to cover this up, and seeking to create the conditions for yet another sell-out agreement, the NSWNA's action yesterday amounted to a demobilisation of its members.

A stopwork meeting in Sydney was attended by only a couple of hundred workers. They were hustled into the city Town Hall to prevent any informal discussion. An email to members said the Sydney meeting was being streamed to only seven other locations. Voting tallies indicate that just over 1,000 workers participated in the meeting across the entire state, despite there being 50,000 public nurses and midwives in NSW.

The form of the meeting, aimed at suppressing discussion, was intimately tied to its content.

NSWNMA general secretary Brett Holmes presented a report bemoaning the inadequacy of Perrottet's hospital funding announcements.

When the government first unveiled its announcements, the union had effectively promoted the sham measures, posting on its Facebook page that they showed "Your strikes work!" The NSWNMA described pro-rata "appreciation payments" for casuals as "fantastic news" and a "union win." Only amid criticism from workers did the NSWNMA tone down its backing for Perrottet's manoeuvre.

All Holmes advanced in terms of a perspective was a call for "all political parties to meet urgently with the NSWNMA leadership to negotiate." This would focus solely on "our

demand for improved and enforceable workloads.”

Holmes was compelled to note that the NSW Labor opposition and its leader, Chris Minns, have rejected any mandated nurse-to-patient ratios. The union would “continue to talk to them and convince them that this is in their best interests to have the nurses and midwives saying we want a change of government” at the upcoming state election in March.

The NSWNMA leadership is begging Minns to put forward a phony promise of ratios, in order to transform the nurses’ dispute into an adjunct of the Labor election campaign. In other states where Labor is in office, including Victoria and Queensland, ratios are in place, but they are never adhered to, because they have been accompanied by funding cuts.

The only other official motion authorised the NSWNMA to call ballots on industrial action prior to March 26, i.e., in the lead-up to the state election next year. No concrete action was outlined.

On the issue of pay, the union has effectively already announced its capitulation to Perrottet. In his report, Holmes said the NSWNA should ask that the wage component of the agreement span just one year, “rather than locking us into a subsequent below inflation pay rise.” That is a clear signal that the union is prepared to accept the 3 percent rise for at least one year, which would amount to a massive real wage cut.

This issue came to a head in the discussion period. One member put a motion for the union to advance a 7 percent pay claim, citing the soaring cost of living.

Holmes argued against, saying such a demand would be rejected by the government and the pro-business Industrial Relations Tribunal. If nurses insisted on 7 percent, it would mean rejecting Perrottet’s offer of 3 percent. “Three percent is terrible, but zero is worse,” Holmes said.

In comments dripping with contempt for the nurses he claims to represent, Holmes declared: “Feel free to roll me [i.e. vote against him], I’m in a much better financial position at my end of my career than you are.”

This hostility to a pay increase in line with inflation sums up the role of the unions. They are not workers’ organisations, but bureaucratic apparatuses that serve governments and business.

His statements entirely lined up with the position of the Labor Party, at the state and federal level. As part of a broader austerity agenda, Labor Prime Minister Anthony Albanese’s government has opposed any “across-the-board” pay increases. To the extent that pitiful wage rises are granted, these must be tied to greater “productivity,” i.e., cuts to conditions and intensified exploitation.

Significantly, the motion was passed in the face of

Holmes’ opposition, with 522 reportedly voting in favour and 513 against. Another motion from the floor, vaguely calling for “solidarity” with striking teachers and rail workers was also carried.

Both motions closely followed the line of the pseudo-left organisations. Socialist Alternative members claimed on social media that the call for a 7 percent demand was theirs.

A 7 percent pay rise would itself be inadequate, under conditions where the cost of many essential items has already risen by more than 10 percent, with further increases forecast.

More fundamentally, the motion was part of the bid by pseudo-left groups to promote illusions that the unions can be pressured to adopt more “militant” positions. This is aimed at corraling workers behind the thoroughly corporatised trade unions and preventing them from organising independently.

It is directed against the call, issued by the Socialist Equality Party, for nurses to take matters into their own hands, including through the formation of rank-and-file committees, independent of the NSWNMA. Such committees would be the basis for a genuine, unified struggle by all health and public sector workers, together with the working class more broadly, against the onslaught on wages and conditions.

The SEP issued a statement, proposing that workers take up definite demands. These include an immediate pay increase of at least 20 percent; a massive expansion of funding for public health and education; mandated nurse-to-patient ratios and class sizes; a major increase in staffing to ensure that they are enforced; and the repudiation of the “let it rip” COVID program supported by all the official parties and the union.

Above all, the pseudo-left motion on pay demands did not raise any of the political issues nurses confront. It implied that further limited strikes could result in a wage rise.

In reality, as the SEP emphasised, workers are in a political fight, not only with the state Liberal government, but all the official parties, including the federal Labor government. The austerity offensive, in Australia and internationally, underscores the need for workers to take up a new, socialist perspective, aimed at establishing workers’ governments and reorganising society to meet social need, not private profit.



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