

Australia: Striking NSW nurses speak on crisis in healthcare

Our reporters
29 June 2022

On Tuesday, nurses across New South Wales (NSW) took part in strike action against a state government industrial agreement offer which mandates significant real wage cuts and would further entrench the intolerable conditions in the healthcare sector.

As the WSWS reported, the NSW Nurses and Midwives Association (NSWNMA) did everything it could to prevent a unified mobilisation of nurses, much less other health workers, or joint action with the state's public and Catholic school teachers who are striking today.

Instead it held a stopwork meeting in Sydney, streamed to seven other locations. The union promoted the Labor Party as an alternative to the state Liberal-National government, even they both have an identical position in support of wage suppression and budget austerity.

The event underscored the role of the union as an enabler of the government attacks on workers. Its role is to isolate workers and sow demoralisation, in an attempt to end the dispute and force through yet another sell-out agreement.

This underscores the importance of the Socialist Equality Party's call for nurses and other health workers to take matters into their own hands, through the formation of independent rank-and-file committees, and a political struggle against the entire establishment, including the Labor Party.

The WSWS spoke to **John**, a mental health community nurse, who attended the Sydney stopwork meeting. He explained: "The main problem in community nursing is large caseloads. There's a lot of frustration and concerns of practical risks as a result of these caseloads. A woman I work with has a caseload of 40 clients, clinicians feel that 25 is a good size, do the maths.

"If you have a large number of people to work with you can't do your role, which is to try and improve people's ability to manage their lives. There are high risks involved. Three or four years ago a staff member who conducted a home visit was severely assaulted and ended up dying as a result of their injuries."

During the stopwork meeting, NSWNMA general secretary Brett Holmes opposed a motion from the floor for nurses to demand an annual pay rise of seven percent. Even this figure would be beneath the rapidly rising cost of many essential items. John said: "It is clear the leadership does not want their strategies questioned. But the vote did get quite strong support.

"It was largely a delegates meeting, it wasn't really a mass meeting. Consequently, the delegates lined up behind the leadership, but you could hear the underswell of support for seven percent, which passed. Holmes claimed if you go for seven percent, you will get nothing as a result of pushing too hard.

Asked about the SEP statement addressed to striking nurses and teachers, John said, "I think the idea of rank-and-file committees seems to be the only alternative. The response from the membership for the vote indicates that there are a lot of people prepared to fight for things. But they still put up with the union as the leadership and people think the only way is through enterprise agreements. It is hard for a lot of people to conceptualise something different to the unions and capitalism.

"The massive wealth of the small percentage of the ruling class continues to grow. They are the ones who decided to get stuck into the Russians in the Ukraine. They see it as an investment for a control of resources. They wouldn't invest in social services or social welfare. They want to end up with the balkanisation of Russia. It is the same playbook in Yugoslavia, but on a

bigger scale. Then they will turn to China,” he said.

Debbie, a nurse from western Sydney with fifteen years experience, said: “We’re constantly working extra hours now. There are not enough staff and not enough beds. Its impacting on patient safety. It’s been like this for years, but it’s gotten worse with COVID.

“We used to have lots of nurses coming over from England and elsewhere, but we’ve had none of that for the past two years. A lot of older nurses are retiring because they’re getting burnt out and they just can’t take it.”

Peter, another Sydney nurse, said: “I’m here today because we need to decide our next step. The NSW government did not say anything about nurse-to-patient ratios in their budget last month, they’re opposed to them. We need these ratios because without them the hospital does not have the obligation to ensure there are enough nurses for patients.

“Sometimes we’re quite short-staffed, and without the ratio, there’s no legal recourse for us to demand adequate staffing. It’s a question of safety, for patients and for nurses. This is nothing new, it’s been going on for a long time.

Sophie, a Sydney nurse, said: “A lot of people have resigned over the last two years. We’re just constantly short-staffed. It makes it harder to care for patients. Some of us are having to work more overtime, we try to share it around. But when staff leave, they’re not always replaced. So many are leaving that it’s probably hard to replace them.”

Asked about the claims from Labor and Liberal-National governments and the media that the pandemic is a thing of the past, Sophie replied: “It’s definitely not over. It may feel like it’s over for people who aren’t in healthcare but we are seeing it every single day and it’s overwhelming the hospitals. The media get over a topic and they just move on, even if the issue is not resolved.”

Asked if anything had changed as a result of the limited stoppages called by the union, Sophie stated, “Not that I can see. We knew this would be the case. We just have to keep pushing for it.”

Sophie had heard about a teachers strike this Thursday. Asked why the nurses and teachers were not striking on the same day, she said, “I’m really not sure.” She agreed that there should be unified action. “That’s a really good idea, we all face the same

issues.”

Martin, who provides physical education programs to public schools, was walking by the Sydney Town Hall where the stopwork meeting was held. He expressed support for the nurses, as well as the SEP’s call for a unified struggle of health workers and educators.

“It’s hard for teachers, it’s hard for nurses, all of us are working harder, but pay is not going up. Teachers I know are really struggling. They struggle to manage their time, to prepare and to teach. They have a major responsibility. It’s hard enough to take care of one kid, they’re taking care of 30 kids. The stress level is huge. They’re not working six or eight hours a day, they’re working ten or more hours, several of them unpaid.

“People should go out there and speak their mind and stand their ground. We need teachers and doctors and nurses. They play a key role in our society.”

The Health Workers’ Rank-and-File Committee (HRWFC) is fighting to organise nurses and others throughout the sector, for a genuine struggle in defence of pay and conditions, including through unity with teachers, rail staff and other sections of workers. It can be contacted here: sephw.aus@gmail.com



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