

Australia: Western Sydney nurses protest unsafe conditions for patients as union steps up isolation

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Nurses at two Western Sydney hospitals held demonstrations at the end of their shifts on Monday morning, protesting chronic understaffing and overcrowding amid a growing surge of COVID-19 infections.

The Blacktown and Westmead Hospital health workers were calling for mandatory nurse-to-patient ratios of 1:3 in emergency departments and 1:4 on general wards, as well as an overall increase in staff numbers.

As a result of staff shortages, the nurses said, patients are waiting hours for urgent care, some suffering heart attacks or strokes in waiting rooms, and are frequently forced to sleep in corridors as there are no staffed beds available in emergency or on wards.

The longstanding staffing crisis in health has been dramatically worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic. Currently, there are more than 2,200 COVID-19 patients in NSW hospitals, a figure that is rapidly approaching the January peak of 2,943. More than 2,500 health workers in the state are unable to work due to COVID-19 infection or exposure.

This is the direct result of the abandonment of virtually all public health measures under the “let it rip” policies embraced by all Australian governments, Labor and Liberal-National alike. This homicidal strategy has created the conditions for the current wave of infection and illness to be far worse than the initial Omicron surge.

The workers also face cuts to real wages, as they, like all public sector workers in New South Wales (NSW), are subject to a punitive cap on annual wage increases. While this was recently increased from 2.5 percent to 3 percent in response to a wave of industrial action, it is still far below the official inflation figure of 5.1 percent.

The decision by dozens of nurses at each of the hospitals to protest on their own time, at the end of a

gruelling twelve-hour night shift, reflects both the magnitude of the escalating crisis and the determination of workers to fight for the interests of their patients and themselves.

But the actual demonstrations, organised by the New South Wales Nurses and Midwives Association (NSWNMA), were little more than public relations stunts, designed to further the union’s isolation of workers and contort their struggle into a Labor election campaign.

Union organisers led the workers through a series of chants, the most telling of which was: “Watch out Perrottet, Western Sydney’s on our way!”

Since the first mass strike by nurses in February, the NSWNMA has insisted that NSW Premier Dominic Perrottet and his Liberal-National state government are solely responsible for the crisis in the hospital system, a blatant lie designed to cover up the bipartisan union-enforced assault on public health over decades.

Even as the union speakers denounced the Perrottet government, they appealed to the premier to tour the emergency department, cynically suggesting to workers that decades of funding and pay cuts would be reversed if only the government knew just how bad conditions had become.

The organisers concluded Monday’s protest by declaring there would be another strike at the end of August, underscoring that the union will continue to draw out the dispute with sporadic one-off actions in the lead-up to the March 2023 state election.

The reality is that the election of a Labor government will do nothing to address the issues confronting nurses. In May, the NSW Labor opposition sided with the Liberal-National government to block a push to legislate ratios in regional and rural hospitals.

NSW Labor leader Chris Minns has also made clear that

any wage increases for public sector workers in the state must be based on increased productivity. This is in line with the austerity agenda of Anthony Albanese's federal Labor government, which, before the May 21 election promised "a better future," but is now demanding "sacrifices" from workers and warning of deepening cuts to real wages.

Throughout the dispute this year, the union has fostered illusions that conditions for health workers are more favourable in the neighbouring Labor-governed states of Queensland and Victoria, as a result of minimum nurse-to-patient ratios. At Monday's demonstrations, the union was attempting to take this divisive lie even further, suggesting that the struggle of nurses in Western Sydney is somehow separate from that of their colleagues in the rest of the city and across the state.

The purpose is to turn sections of workers against each other, just as growing numbers of nurses are calling for a broader mobilisation, not just of all health workers, but of teachers and other sections of the working class.

In response to Monday's demonstrations, one worker wrote on the NSWNMA Facebook page: "I'm a little disappointed we all didn't stand United and walk out in unison as many colleagues in various EDs are facing the same challenges. We are all suffering so we should ALL STAND UNITED in every LHD [Local Health District]."

Mehring Books, the publishing arm of the Socialist Equality Party (US), is proud to announce the publication of Volume 1 of *COVID, Capitalism, and Class War: A Social and Political Chronology of the Pandemic*, a compilation of the *World Socialist Web Site's* coverage of this global crisis.

Another wrote: "All the states nursing unions should band together, because we all have the same problem. We have heard nothing from the vic union ANMF while this is going on up in nsw."

The union is desperate to prevent any such broadening of the struggle, and is attempting to divert the anger and determination of nurses into a dwindling series of increasingly limited and demoralising actions, until the exhausted workers begrudgingly accept the government's claims that nothing can be done.

This objective was sharply expressed at a June 28 stop-work meeting, held after the third vote for statewide strike action in less than six months. Instead of large public demonstrations across the state, the union held a single closed meeting in Sydney, with just over 1,000 workers attending, mostly via livestream. Only a couple of hundred workers attended in person.

NSWNMA general secretary Brett Holmes argued against a motion from the floor to demand a 7 percent per annum pay rise. Holmes threatened "three percent is terrible, but zero is worse," but could not prevent the motion from passing. Unable to maintain complete control over even this relatively small meeting, the union is now attempting to wear workers down one facility at a time.

On three occasions this year, the anger and frustration of nurses has compelled the NSWNMA to call statewide strikes. In February and March, these included mass rallies in Sydney and other cities and towns. Even then, the union sought to limit the actions as much as possible, forcing separate votes in each branch, meaning workers struck at different times depending on their location.

Only NSWNMA members working in public hospitals have been allowed to take part, excluding aged care workers as well as nurses and midwives employed in the private sector. The striking workers have been kept completely separate from thousands of other health workers and paramedics covered by different unions, who have also taken industrial action in recent months over declining real wages and impossible working conditions.

Throughout Australia and around the world, health workers confront the same issues—low pay amid skyrocketing inflation, understaffing, overwork and the constant risk of serious illness or death from COVID-19.

To advance their struggle for safe staffing levels, better patient outcomes, decent wages and the elimination of COVID-19, nurses and midwives must reject the NSWNMA's campaign of isolation. Instead, they must turn to the growing numbers of workers in health, education, transport, throughout the public sector and more broadly, who are reentering the class struggle after decades of union suppression.

This will require the formation of new organisations of struggle, rank-and-file committees, independent of the NSWNMA and all other unions, and a fight for a socialist perspective and the establishment of workers' governments to reorganise society to serve the interests of social need, not private profit.



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