

Australia: Expand strike action by NSW nurses! Form rank-and-file committees to fight for unified struggle!

Health Workers Rank-and-File Committee (Australia)
30 August 2022

Some 50,000 public sector nurses and midwives will strike across New South Wales (NSW) for up to 24 hours on September 1, to demand shift-by-shift nurse-to-patient ratios, staffing increases and a 7 percent pay increase. It will be the fourth statewide walkout by NSW nurses this year.

The fact that nurses voted by 94 percent in favour of strike action reflects their determination to fight. Nurses have repeatedly called for unified action with other workers currently engaged in industrial disputes, including other health workers, as well as teachers and rail workers.

But the design of Thursday's strike reflects a deepening of the isolation strategy perpetrated by the NSW Nurses and Midwives Association (NSWNMA) throughout this dispute.

No mass rallies will be held, with workers instead confined to protests at individual hospitals. Once again, NSWNMA members working in the private sector, along with all health workers not covered by the union, will be excluded from the strike.

The rejection by the union leaders of united action by all nurses and other health workers in NSW and nationally is not a mistaken tactic but a consciously pursued strategy of the NSWNMA to divide and demoralise workers. This is being done in preparation for ramming through a rotten union-government deal that meets none of their demands. It will ultimately weaken nurses and expose them to legal action under the Industrial Relations Commission, as threatened by the right-wing Liberal-National government. Then the union will declare that it can't withstand the legal action and call off all struggles.

To prevent this, nurses must take matters into their own hands. This means forming rank-and-file committees in every hospital and workplace, independent of the unions and controlled by workers themselves. This is how nurses can smash the NSWNMA isolation operation, reach out to other workers throughout health and the broader working class, and plan a unified struggle for improved wages and conditions, including ratios and safe staffing levels.

Thursday's diffuse and diluted action follows on from a handful of small protests called by the union since June, limited to single hospitals and attended by workers in their own time. NSWNMA speakers at these events falsely portrayed the dire conditions faced by workers as limited not only to the state, but to the individual hospitals.

There is a striking contrast between what is planned for Thursday and strikes held in February and March, when the palpable anger and frustration of nurses and midwives forced the NSWNMA to hold mass strike rallies across the state. These events, while designed to allow workers to let off steam and divert their fury into plaintive appeals to the state Liberal-National government, were nevertheless powerful demonstrations of the mounting unrest among health workers.

In late June, the NSWNMA called another statewide "strike," which amounted to a stopwork meeting in Sydney, attended in person by only a few hundred workers, while a similar number participated via a live stream.

Even at this tightly-controlled meeting, workers made clear they were determined to fight, voting to increase their pay claim to 7 percent, despite then NSWNMA secretary Brett Holmes threatening "three percent is terrible, but zero is worse."

The turn from mass rallies to sporadic, isolated flag-waving exercises is part of a move by the NSWNMA to transform the nurses' struggle into an election campaign for the Labor Party in the March 2023 state election.

This is a dead-end road for workers! NSW Labor opposition leader Chris Minns wears his opposition to the struggles of workers as a badge of honour, proudly declaring on 2GB Radio earlier this month: "I've clashed with the Nurses Association over nurse-to-patient ratios."

Throughout the dispute, the union has alternated between appealing for Perrottet to come to the "negotiating table" and denouncing him, while promoting illusions in the opposition Labor Party.

These are the same governments and parties responsible for the crisis in health! Both have rejected calls to mandate nurse-to-patient ratios, and both are determined to impose further cuts to real wages across the entire public sector, including health.

This is not isolated to NSW. The wage-cutting and service-slashing agenda is agreed to by the entire Australian political establishment. Anthony Albanese's federal Labor government has supported the previous Coalition government's March budget, which cut federal health spending by \$10 billion this year, more than 10 percent in real terms.

The bipartisan nationwide adoption of "let it rip" COVID-19 policies since December 2021 has produced a public health

catastrophe.

The unions do not oppose this homicidal agenda, and have lined up completely with the demands of big business. They are at the forefront of calls for the complete dismantling of any remaining measures to deal with COVID-19. This week, Health Services Union national president Gerard Hayes, echoing the demands of business and the Perrottet government, declared that mandatory isolation should be entirely scrapped, in order to push infected health workers back into workplaces.

The removal of even the most basic public health measures to stop the spread of the virus has already resulted in more than 11,000 COVID-19 deaths in Australia this year, and an estimated 1.2 million people suffering the debilitating effects of Long COVID.

At the beginning of August, daily COVID-19 hospitalisations and deaths reached record levels. More than 3,000 COVID-19 patients are currently receiving treatment in hospitals across Australia, and thousands of health workers are unable to work due to infection or exposure.

This, on top of decades of funding cuts and privatisation by governments of all stripes, facilitated by the unions, has devastated hospitals and rendered health workers unable to provide high-quality care to their patients. Nurses are leaving the profession in droves.

Across the country, emergency departments are overflowing, with patients waiting hours for treatment in ambulances and makeshift outdoor tents.

Hospitals are chronically understaffed, including in Queensland, Victoria and the Australian Capital Territory, where there are legally-mandated ratios. It is a lie that conditions for health workers are better in these states and territories.

This month alone, health workers have taken limited industrial action over wages and staffing across Australia. This includes:

- Demonstrations by hundreds of public hospital health workers in South Australia. Public hospital nurses were prevented from joining the rallies at the last minute by the Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation (ANMF).
- Thousands of health workers in Western Australia walked off the job to oppose the state Labor government's 2.75 percent cap on wage increases for public sector workers.
- Rallies by nurses and midwives from two Queensland private hospitals, Cairns Private and St Vincent's Private Hospital in Brisbane and Northside, demanding improved staffing and conditions.
- Ongoing action by hundreds of Tasmanian nurses to protest unsafe staffing levels, low pay and unsustainable workloads. The ANMF (Tasmania) has limited their action to 15-minute stoppages.

While these struggles, primarily in Labor-governed states, have been restricted by the unions to token protests, what they reflect is that, contrary to the lies of the NSWNMA, the dire conditions confronting NSW hospital workers are common across the country and cannot be blamed solely on Perrottet's Liberal-National government.

There is broad support among nurses and other sections of workers for a unified struggle, but this is impossible within the

framework of the unions. The NSWNMA is not even allowing nurses from different hospitals across NSW to fight together!

The urgent task is for health workers to form independent rank-and-file committees, outside the shackles of the trade unions, to coordinate and expand their struggle to include workers across the country and internationally who confront the same fundamental issues of soaring inflation, wage cuts, social austerity and the devastating consequences of official "let it rip" COVID policies.

The Health Workers Rank-And-File Committee (HWRFC) proposes that nurses adopt the following demands, as the starting point of a fight for their social rights:

- An across-the-board pay increase of at least 20 percent, with wages fully indexed against inflation and automatic monthly cost of living adjustments. Any agreement must keep pace with the rising cost of living, but also restore decades of real-wage cuts, which were deepened during the pandemic.
- Mandatory and enforced minimum nurse-to-patient ratios throughout hospitals, as determined democratically by health workers themselves based on what is required.
- Immediate hiring of thousands of health workers to address chronic staff shortages and end the current punishing workloads.
- Implement the necessary public health care measures to combat COVID-19 in hospitals and healthcare workplaces, including the provision of free, high-quality N95s or better for all staff and adequate ventilation/air filtration, as part of a broader program to eliminate the virus.
- End the privatisation of essential social services. Massively expand spending on public health to ensure workers are equipped with all the necessary resources to do their job safely and to the highest standard.

These demands can and must be won, but it will require a political fight against not only the Perrottet government, but Labor, the unions and all other defenders of capitalism, who will insist there is "no money."

To free the necessary resources from the grip of the corporate and financial elite, workers must take up a fight for workers' governments to reorganise society along socialist lines, placing hospitals, along with the banks and major corporations, under democratic workers' control and ownership, to serve the needs of working people.

This is an international fight, which requires the unity of workers all over the world. The HWRFC calls on nurses in Australia to join with their class brothers and sisters in the fight to build the International Workers' Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).

We urge health workers to contact us to discuss the establishment of independent rank-and file committees to take forward this fight.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact