

Australia: NSW nurses hold fourth statewide strike

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Thousands of public sector nurses and midwives took strike action yesterday in New South Wales (NSW) in locations across the state, demanding minimum shift-by-shift nurse-to-patient ratios of 3:1 in emergency departments and 4:1 in the wards and a 7 percent pay increase. It was the fourth state-wide walkout by NSW nurses this year.

There is widespread anger among workers over unbearable conditions including chronic underfunding, unrelenting workloads and overcrowding, exacerbated by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

In August, 94 percent of nurses and midwives voted in favour of the strike. They have repeatedly called for united action with other workers engaged in industrial disputes, including other health workers, rail staff and teachers. This was reflected in the comments made by nurses who spoke to *World Socialist Web Site* reporters yesterday.

The NSW Nurses and Midwives' Association (NSWNMA), however, designed the strike to deepen the isolation of nurses. Rather than mass rallies, workers attended protests spread out across 60 separate locations, mainly outside individual hospitals.

Slightly larger marches were held in Newcastle and Wollongong, as well as a 24-hour "picket" at Westmead hospital in Western Sydney, cordoned off by security to allow people to pass through. As in previous strikes, NSWNMA members working in the private sector were excluded, as were other health workers not covered by the union.

At these limited events, union speakers issued plaintive calls for political parties to "listen" to striking nurses, a line put forward by the NSWNMA since the first statewide nurses' strike in February. Again, sole blame for the crisis in the hospitals was laid at the feet of the NSW Liberal government and Premier Dominic Perrottet.

Michael Whaites, acting assistant general secretary said in a speech delivered at Westmead hospital in Sydney, "we are sick and tired of Perrottet not listening to... qualified and experienced health care practitioners... It's about time Perrottet listened."

The thrust of the speeches was to divert nurses' anger towards the Perrottet government, while covering over the role of the Labor Party and the union itself in creating the dire conditions confronting health workers.

A union speaker at the Royal Prince Alfred (RPA) hospital in Sydney said: "What is the ALP [Australian Labor Party] saying? Nothing."

Promoting the illusion that Labor could be reformed, she continued: "They are in negotiations with us, and let's see over the coming weeks if we can reach an agreement."

NSW Labor leader Chris Minns has made clear that he is opposed to shift-by-shift nurse-to-patient ratios, and that any wage increase for the public sector must be tied to "productivity" increases.

The federal Labor government is committed to a wage-slashing austerity agenda and has called for workers to make "sacrifices" and swallow "tough medicine."

The "let it rip" COVID-19 agenda, in which virtually all public health measures have been dropped in line with the demands of big business, has been directly imposed by Labor and the unions. This homicidal bipartisan policy is responsible for more than 11,000 deaths in 2022 alone and the ongoing waves of infection have created a catastrophe in the hospital system.

This has come on top of decades of cuts to public health funding, carried out in equal measure by Labor and Liberal-National governments, state, territory and federal. This ongoing slashing of resources, jobs and wages has been enforced by the NSWNMA and other health unions, which have suppressed any opposition to the deepening assault.

NSW Greens parliamentarian for Newtown Jenny Leong was given the platform to speak at the RPA demonstration. Like the NSWNMA speakers, she pinned the blame entirely on the Liberal-National government.

This is in line with the whole orientation of the Greens, which is to serve as a left front for Labor in elections, before voting along with the major party on most issues.

The NSWNMA's attempt to transform the struggle of nurses and midwives into a protracted campaign for Labor

and the Greens in the lead-up to the elections in March 2023 is a dead-end road for workers. As developments since the May federal election have already shown, nothing will be resolved for workers through the election of these capitalist parties.

The Socialist Equality Party intervened into the strike, supporting the nurses and raising the need for the formation of rank-and-file committees to expand the struggle. Union officials at Westmead hospital ripped SEP statements out of workers hands, with one official remarking on the material, “It may be the truth, but it isn’t our message.”

This is no mere slip of the tongue. The NSWNMA is highly sensitive to the material, which exposes its record of betrayals and concessions, and calls for unified action by nurses and other health workers, as well as teachers, rail workers and broader layers. This is the “message” the union is desperately seeking to suppress.

While the first two strikes in February and March this year also excluded all health workers other than public hospital nurses covered by the NSWNMA, they featured rallies of thousands of nurses and midwives in the centre of Sydney, defying court ordered bans.

It was not until late June that stop-work action was called again, in response to an offer of a 3 percent pay deal by Perrottet. The NSWNMA refused to call a mass rally, instead holding a limited stop-work meeting at Sydney Town Hall, in which just over 1,000 nurses participated.

Despite the demoralising design of the affair, workers voted overwhelmingly for mass strike action and passed a motion to advance a 7 percent pay claim, over the objections of the union leadership.

In late July, demonstrations were held outside two Western Sydney hospitals. These were little more than public relations stunts, attended by workers on their own time.

While the NSWNMA claims the conditions confronted by NSW nurses are unique to NSW and the Liberal-National government, health workers around the country are faced with the same crisis.

In multiple states, most with Labor governments, struggles are beginning to break out among health workers, despite the suppression of the unions, which above all are determined to prevent any unified struggle across state borders.

In the NSW public sector, more than 100,000 other workers, in health, education, transport and more broadly, have also engaged in strikes this year. All are subject to the same punitive cap on public sector wages as are the nurses.

At each of these strikes, workers have expressed support for unified action across the public sector, but the unions have ensured workers remained isolated.

Rail workers have been in negotiations for a new enterprise agreement for more than 18 months. In that time

the Rail, Tram and Bus Union has refused to call mass strikes, instead holding a handful of limited stoppages over the course of months, while issuing appeals to governments to come to the table and negotiate.

Rail workers are now the target of vicious denunciations and threats from the Perrottet government, which is carrying out the agenda of the whole ruling class. This frontal assault is intended to set a precedent that will then be taken up against all workers, including nurses.

Workers must draw the lessons of these experiences. Nurses and midwives cannot take their struggle forward within the stranglehold of the unions. This will result in wage cuts, continued destruction of job conditions and the dissipation and isolation of workers.

The perspective advanced by the NSWNMA at the strike yesterday demonstrates the urgent need for nurses and midwives to break free from the unions and form independent rank-and-file committees at their workplaces, in order to coordinate and expand their struggle to include workers across the country and internationally.

These committees will provide the mechanism for workers to hold open discussions, share information and prepare a unified counter-offensive against the growing attacks on the jobs, wages and conditions of the entire working class.

Above all, what is needed is a fight for workers’ governments that would implement socialist policies so that society is democratically reorganised in the interests of ordinary working people. The fight for high-quality public health care, available to all, cannot be won as long as the vast wealth created by the working class is controlled by the financial and corporate elite.



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