

Australia: Chris O'Brien Lifehouse nurses' open letter calls for "no" vote on union-management agreement

Health Workers Rank-and-File Committee (Australia)
8 September 2022

Nurses from Chris O'Brien Lifehouse have issued an open letter to the New South Wales Nurses and Midwives Association (NSWNMA) calling for the rejection of a proposed enterprise agreement (EA) that will slash real wages.

Lifehouse is a private cancer treatment centre, affiliated with the neighbouring Royal Prince Alfred, a major public teaching hospital in Sydney, New South Wales (NSW).

Nurses have until September 12 to vote on the proposed agreement, which was negotiated behind closed doors by management and the NSWNMA.

Nurses know that the agreement will do nothing but deepen the assault on wages and conditions. The open letter declares, in opposition to the proposed agreement: "3 percent is a real wage cut! The NSWNMA should vote NO to the proposed Lifehouse Nurses Agreement 2022."

The letter explains that accepting the proposal would cause "the greatest decrease in nurses' real wages in decades, and cannot be allowed to be promoted by Lifehouse without union opposition."

"The cost of living continues to rise. Inflation is currently above 6%, and the RBA has predicted that it will be above 7% by the end of the year. The current offer from Lifehouse of a 3% yearly increase to pay is far below the rate of inflation, making their offer a pay cut in real terms. Beyond this, the majority of the claims from the NSWNMA's Log of Claims submitted to Lifehouse have been unmet.

"Thus far, the NSWNMA has remained "neutral" on the proposed offer, effectively ceding the narrative to management, which has declared that all communications via posters on-site at Lifehouse must be approved by the hospital executive. Management has removed all "vote no" posters, and put up their own "vote yes" posters."

The open letter demands that the NSWNMA support the "vote no" campaign among workers at Lifehouse and urges the membership to vote "no" to the proposed agreement.

The open letter is an important step forward for nurses,

representing both the determination of workers to fight for their pay and conditions, and their recognition that this brings them into conflict with the NSWNMA bureaucracy.

The Health Workers Rank-and-File Committee agrees with the sentiment in the letter and urges all Lifehouse nurses to vote "no" to the agreement. We warn, however, that the NSWNMA is far from "neutral."

The union is employing a tried and tested method of pushing through sell-out deals while maintaining a veneer of separation from management. By taking a supposedly "neutral" position, the NSWNMA is endorsing the hospital's "yes" campaign and sending a strong message to workers that they will not have the support of the union if they oppose the deal.

A log of claims was sent to nurses in June, in which Lifehouse management had rejected all demands, including for ratios of one nurse for every four patients and one-on-one in ICU and a minimum ten-hour break between shifts.

The agreement would lock nurses into years of real wage cuts, with annual pay "increases" of 3 percent from July 2022, 3 percent from September 2023 and 2 percent from September 2024, under conditions where the official inflation rate is at 6.1 percent and expected to rise further before the end of the year. This follows years of stagnant or declining real wages under the previous EA, in which the NSWNMA agreed to increases of 2.5 percent in 2019, 1.25 percent in 2020 and 2.5 percent in July 2021.

The agreement rejects nurses' demands for the right to refuse on-call shifts due to family responsibilities, scheduled meal breaks, and an end to forced 12-hour shifts. The only change being proposed is to increase non-primary carer parental leave by one week, to a total of two-weeks leave—far short of the four weeks demanded in the claim.

The agreement also rejects the demand for paid pandemic leave and includes no other safety measures to protect workers from COVID-19.

The NSWNMA's tacit promotion of this rotten agreement,

despite the opposition of workers, stands as a clear warning to the 50,000 public sector nurses and midwives currently engaged in a dispute with the NSW government. If this agreement passes, it will set a benchmark for a sell-out agreement covering the public sector staff.

These workers went on strike across the state for 24 hours last week to demand shift-by-shift nurse-to-patient ratios, increased staffing and wages. It was the fourth statewide walkout by public sector nurses this year.

Nurses have repeatedly called for the expansion of the strikes and the development of a unified struggle with other workers. In direct opposition to this demand, the union has kept public sector nurses and midwives isolated from all other health workers, including other NSWNMA members, such as the Lifehouse workers.

The nurses' struggles have also been kept separate from other strikes by NSW public sector workers, including in education and on the railways.

Under conditions of ongoing staffing shortages across the entire healthcare sector, health workers are being forced to take on ever-greater workloads, extra shifts and overtime, putting the health and lives of themselves and their patients at risk. Staffing shortages have been exacerbated by COVID-19, which has seen thousands of health workers unable to work each day due to infection or exposure.

The nationwide adoption of "let it rip" COVID-19 policies since December 2021, by Labor and Liberal-National governments alike, has exacerbated the crisis in healthcare and resulted in more than 12,000 COVID-19 deaths in Australia this year.

The NSWNMA does not oppose this homicidal agenda, nor does it fight for the implementation of basic safety measures for health workers, including paid pandemic leave, because it lines up completely with the demands of big business.

The unions, including the health unions, have been at the forefront of calls for the complete dismantling of any remaining measures to deal with COVID-19. Last month, Health Services Union National President Gerard Hayes, echoing the demands of business, declared that mandatory isolation should be entirely scrapped, in order to push infected workers back into workplaces.

Around the world, health workers and the broader working class confront a deepening assault on their wages and conditions. Workers are responding to this, with a global wave of strikes and protests. They are taking the form of a direct struggle against the corporatised unions, which have played the linchpin role in suppressing the class struggle for the past forty years.

The open letter by Lifehouse nurses expresses the fact that workers in Australia are coming to recognise the necessity of

such a rebellion against the unions.

The further assault on nurses' wages and conditions through the Lifehouse union-management agreement must be decisively rejected. But the fight for demands based on what nurses and health workers actually need, not the dictates of corporate profit, cannot be left in the hands of the NSWNMA.

The next step in the struggle, opened up by the important open letter, is the formation of genuine organisations of struggle, completely independent of the union. We urge Lifehouse staff to establish their own rank-and-file committee, to develop the struggle against the agreement, to share information and to begin to unite with health staff in the public hospitals and more broadly in a common struggle for improved wages and conditions, including ratios and safe staffing levels. The Health Workers Rank and File Committee will assist in this process.

The onslaught against healthcare, by governments across the country, abetted by the union, poses important political issues before health workers. What has been revealed in the pandemic is the incompatibility of a society based on corporate profit, with the most basic needs of working people, including safety, high-quality public healthcare and life itself.

The alternative is a socialist perspective, which seeks to reorganise society in the interests of the working class. Such a perspective would fight for the entire healthcare system, along with the banks and the major corporations to be placed under public ownership and democratic workers' control. This is ultimately the only means of securing a high-quality, public healthcare system, with free care for all, and decent pay and conditions for staff.

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



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact