

Australia: Chris O'Brien Lifehouse nurse endorses “Open Letter” call to reject management enterprise offer

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

In opposition to the proposed agreement, the open letter states: “3 percent is a real wage cut! The NSWNMA should vote NO to the proposed Lifehouse Nurses Agreement 2022.”

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with a Lifehouse nurse, Jayne, about nurses’ campaign for a “no vote.”

WSWS: What were the origins of the open letter? How did you find out about it?

Jayne: The open letter was initiated by a group of nurses at Lifehouse. It was sent to me by one of my co-workers and I passed it onto others.

WSWS: How long has EA negotiation been going on?

Jayne: The union and management started negotiations for the EA in May this year. The only input nurses had was the union sent us a survey asking about what was important to us. It wasn't clear that it was for the EA. Then, in June the first EA was sent out and the union sent an email to say that it had been in discussion with management, and that Lifehouse had rejected virtually all of the log of claims that the union put forward.

A union representative came to Lifehouse to hold a couple of informal discussions. Only a few people went because it is so busy these days. There was nothing like a “stop-work” meeting organised, it was just, “Come along if you'd like to have a discussion.”

At that point, there had been some strikes by nurses in the NSW public sector over a 3 percent pay offer and staffing ratios. Myself and other nurses said that 3 percent was not enough, it wasn't liveable. The price of food and petrol is already high, and it keeps rising. We're concerned about this and also about the health and wellbeing of our patients.

But after these discussions, the union went back to negotiate with management, and nothing changed. The union sent us an email after their second negotiation, saying that we had to vote on this and that it's up to the nurses. So that's why the open letter was drawn up.

WSWS: What is the general attitude of Lifehouse nurses to the offer? Why do you think the union took a “neutral” position on the offer?

Jayne: There's huge anger and disappointment about the offer and the union's stance. The nurses I've spoken to have said that they are voting no. There's a notion that the union was supposed to be representing nurses, but then the result has been that the majority of claims were rejected by Lifehouse management, and that's what's we're being told to vote for. We've been told that management don't have any money to meet our demands. The union is accepting that and so it's being used by management to contain nurses' anger.

WSWS: What are your conditions like at Lifehouse?

Jayne: When I first started working Lifehouse it was very well staffed, but over time nurses have left and they weren't replaced. For example, one clinic nurse

went on maternity leave. They didn't replace her but decided to use the nurses from another clinic when needed. There are less nurses everywhere when more and more is being required of us.

WSWS: Health Services Union (HSU) members at Lifehouse have recently rejected their EA but management has rejected that vote and wants another vote. What do you think about the HSU allowing that to go ahead?

Jayne: I think the HSU staff rejecting the EA is important. The 3 percent wage proposal is below inflation. The HSU covers pretty much all those who are not nurses, plus some nurses with special roles, admin staff and cleaners.

Lifehouse management's rejection of the HSU vote is outrageous. The CEO was saying that there was too much union interference. There were posters around which have now been taken down. They even tried to say that some people didn't realise they were voting against the company when they voted no!

The HSU isn't opposing this but saying we have to have a re-vote. It means they are just caving in and not supporting their membership at all.

If they have a re-vote and workers vote no again, and the hospital rejects it, they'll go on until they wear workers down. I was talking to an HSU worker on Friday who said "Surely [Lifehouse] can't just keep sending the same conditions and agreement without changing it, can they? They must make some other offer."

I said they shouldn't but gave the example of Coles warehouse workers at Smeaton Grange who were given virtually the same agreement again and again. They voted it down 11 times but were eventually worn down. This has happened in other areas.

WSWS: Should NSWMA and HSU members have a united campaign?

Jayne: Yes, it would be important if the nurses and HSU staff joined together. They may have different jobs but still at the end of the day you are working in the same run-down hospital system.

When Lifehouse opened they used to have two or three admin staff on a desk but a couple of years later they changed it with the excuse that patients don't like coming and seeing receptionists talking among themselves. They reduced it to only one person which means there's always a big line of patients waiting

because that one admin person is trying to the booking in and answering the phone. Everybody is getting squeezed.

WSWS: Lifehouse is across the road from the Royal Prince Alfred and many of the doctors and procedures are transferred at various times from one hospital to the other. Shouldn't Lifehouse campaign and public nurses and health workers be unified?

Jayne: Yes, public and private sector workers campaigns should be joined. It doesn't make sense not to unify the struggle of workers. There are only minor differences between the public sector and private sector. The conditions are basically the same. We've all been wrecked by years of underfunding.

It would take a campaign of public and private nurses to get our demands met but the unions aren't supporting this. There would need to be a rebellion of workers to create that and there's a growing understanding that this is what is necessary and must be done.

WSWS: What do you think of our call for Lifehouse nurses to form independent rank-and-file committees to advance this fight?

Jayne: I think the idea of nurses and all workers forming rank-and-file committees is a really good idea. We need organisations so that we can fight together.



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