

Australia: Chris O'Brien Lifehouse nurses overwhelmingly reject union sell-out agreement

Max Boddy, Martin Scott
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On Monday, nurses from Chris O'Brien Lifehouse voted overwhelmingly to reject a sell-out union-management enterprise bargaining agreement (EBA) that would have slashed real wages.

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

In opposition to the NSW Nurses and Midwives Association (NSWNMA), and under immense pressure from management, the proposed agreement was rejected by 68 percent of nurses who participated in the ballot.

This important result follows the issuing of an open letter by Lifehouse nurses, urging their co-workers to reject the deal and demanding that the union call for a “no” vote.

The Health Workers' Rank-and-File Committee and the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) publicised the open letter, and held campaigns opposing the agreement and calling for workers to take the next step in forming an independent rank-and-file committee.

The open letter, and the mounting opposition to the union sell-out, has not been mentioned by another media outlet or political organisation.

The letter warned that accepting the proposed agreement, which offered a measly 3 percent per annum wage increase, would result in “the greatest decrease in nurses' real wages in decades.” Inflation was already at 6.1 percent in June, and is predicted to exceed 7 percent by the end of the year.

The letter denounced the NSWNMA's “neutral” stance on the EBA, calling the union out for “ceding the narrative to management,” which had “removed all “vote no” posters, and put up their own “vote yes” posters.”

In addition to the posters, Lifehouse also sent multiple

emails to workers urging nurses to “say yes.” In a video sent last Friday, Director of Clinical Operations Catherine Lambert explained a few “facts” about the “fair and reasonable offer.”

This so-called “fair” offer rejected all the demands in the log of claims set out by nurses in June, including for minimum ratios of one nurse to four patients on wards and one to one in intensive care, as well as a minimum ten-hour break between shifts.

The proposed agreement was designed to lock nurses into three years of wage cuts and rejected nurses' demands for scheduled meal breaks, the right to refuse on-call shifts and an end to forced 12-hour shifts. Demands for paid pandemic leave were also rejected and the offer included no other safety measures to protect workers from COVID-19.

Lifehouse management is furious with the ballot result, but their real concern is that it was a sign of an incipient rebellion of workers against the suppression of the union. This is demonstrated by their hostile response to the SEP and its calls for the building of independent rank-and-file committees.

When SEP campaigners went to the hospital yesterday, Chief Financial Officer Rodney Green came out in a frenzy demanding they leave the public footpath.

Green called over both Lifehouse and RPA security. One woman who appeared with him took a leaflet and said to Green, “They aren't with the union.” Green replied, “You call the union, I'll call the police.”

This statement reveals more than Green may have intended. The union will be used, in conjunction with management and, if necessary, the state, to crush any opposition to their sell-out agreement.

Other workers at Lifehouse, covered by the Health Services Union (HSU), recently voted down a similar real

wage-slashing EBA. Lifehouse management has rejected this outcome, demanding a second vote on an unchanged agreement. The HSU has fallen in line with this request and is now forcing workers to again vote on a deal they rejected.

This makes clear that the open letter and the “no” campaign is only the first step. Lifehouse workers must form rank-and-file committees including health workers currently covered by the NSWNMA and the HSU, to wage a struggle against the attacks by management.

The NSWNMA’s support for the rotten Lifehouse deal stands as stark warning of what it is preparing for the 50,000 public sector nurses and midwives currently engaged in a dispute with the NSW government. They have been fighting since the beginning of the year for increased staffing and improvements to wages and conditions.

The NSWNMA is intensely hostile to this fight. In June, the union leadership argued against a motion by nurses to increase their pay increase demand to 7 percent per annum, only adopting the claim after workers voted against the bureaucracy.

Throughout the year, striking nurses and midwives have demanded their industrial action be expanded to include all health workers, including in the private sector such as Lifehouse workers, as well as teachers, rail and bus workers.

In response, the NSWNMA has sought to further isolate the striking workers. In the statewide strike by nurses on September 1, the union held no mass rallies, instead splitting workers up into small protests across 60 separate locations.

The reality is, the NSWNMA, along with all the other health unions, has played a critical role over decades in enforcing the restructuring and privatisation of the public health system and the erosion of wages, conditions and patient care.

The situation facing health workers is unbearable, as massive staff shortages across the sector are forcing greater workloads, extra shifts, and overtime. COVID-19 has exacerbated the already dire conditions, with thousands of nurses unable to work each day due to infection and health workers and their families at constant risk from the virus.

This is the direct result of the embrace of “let it rip” policies by Labor and Liberal-National governments alike, responsible for more than 12,000 deaths this year alone. This has been fully endorsed by the unions, including the NSWNMA, which line up with the demands

of big business for the ending of all public health measures against the virus.

Around the world, workers are responding to the assault on their conditions and wages. Waves of strike action are developing which are beginning to take the form of a direct rebellion against the corporatised unions, which played the essential role of suppressing workers opposition for the past four decades.

The issuing of the open letter by nurses and the rejection of the EBA points the way forward for striking public health nurse and midwives. Workers in Australia are coming to realise that for their struggles to be taken forward a rebellion against the unions is a necessity.

The next step is the formation of genuine organisations of struggle, completely independent of the NSWNMA and other unions. Through these rank-and-file committees, Lifehouse workers can democratically prepare, and organise a fight for, demands based on the actual needs of workers, not what management and the union say is “affordable.”

This struggle must be expanded to unite with public hospital nurses at RPA and throughout the health sector. This will lay the basis for a unified struggle by broad layers of workers, including teachers and rail workers.

The bipartisan onslaught against healthcare by governments across the country, aided and abetted by the unions, can only be opposed through a fight for the establishment of workers’ governments. These would implement socialist policies, placing hospitals, along with the major corporations and banks under democratic workers’ ownership and control. This would allow the reorganisation of society’s resources to provide high-quality, free, public health care, with decent wages and conditions for all health workers.

We encourage health workers to contact the Health Workers Rank and File Committee to discuss this perspective and the establishment of independent rank-and-file committees.



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