

Australia: Health workers support Chris O'Brien Lifehouse nurses' fight against union-management agreement

Health Workers Rank-and-File Committee (Australia)
4 October 2022

The Health Workers Rank-and-File Committee (Australia) has received statements of support for Chris O'Brien Lifehouse nurses, who last month voted overwhelmingly to reject a sell-out union-management enterprise bargaining agreement (EBA) that would have slashed real wages.

The important rejection of the proposed agreement, by 68 percent of nurses, follows the issuing of an open letter by Lifehouse nurses to the NSW Nurses and Midwives Association (NSNWMA), urging their co-workers to reject the deal and demanding that the union call for a “no” vote. It denounced the NSWNMA’s “neutral” stance on the EBA, calling the union out for “ceding the narrative to management.”

The NSWNMA’s tacit promotion of this rotten agreement, despite the opposition of workers, also stands as a clear warning to other sections of nurses and health workers of the sell-out deals being prepared. The open letter and the “vote no” campaign were important first steps, which resulted in the agreement being overwhelmingly rejected.

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. We urge health workers to speak in support of the nurses at Lifehouse and to contact the Health Workers Rank-and-File Committee to discuss this perspective.

David, a respiratory scientist from regional NSW

The nursing staff at Lifehouse have taken an important step forward in their fight against the attack on wages and working conditions, through a collective show of resistance in their open letter.

The open letter makes clear that the nurses’ fight is against the agenda of management and the union. The significance of this can be seen both at home and internationally; a global assault on workers’ wages and conditions is underway and the unions have worked with governments and management

to enforce this.

I work at a major regional public hospital in an outpatient clinical service. Working conditions since the introduction of the “let it rip” COVID policy in Australia have seen record staffing absences while patient waiting lists for outpatient services become longer.

This has been the most exhausting year and I have had to work more weekends than any time during my career. These conditions will only worsen with the systematic removal of mask mandates, including in some healthcare settings, which increases the prevalence of the infection.

I must come in unpaid in order to maintain our service so that it runs effectively during the week and patient tests are done without additional delay. Management will not tolerate any discussion of increased staffing and turns a blind eye to these conditions.

This is why the action of Lifehouse nurses is so important. While they are necessarily defending nursing working conditions, this struggle must be taken up by nurses, doctors and other health workers in the public hospital system who are under similar strain and looking for a way to fight.

It demonstrates the ability of rank-and-file workers to organise independently of the unions. We need to do this across all workplaces and unify our struggles, both among health workers and in other industries.

Mary, a hospital administration worker from Northern NSW

I work in a regional hospital and I am writing to support the principled stand being taken by nurses at Chris O'Brien LifeHouse.

I support the call of the SEP and the WSWs to form rank-and-file committees to free workers from the treachery of the boss’s unions, so workers can take up an independent struggle for improved wages, and in the case of nurses, safe patient ratios.

Workers at my hospital are sick and tired of being divided

from each other by unions calling separate strike days, which are ineffective, as all state government workers are coming under pressure from the same employer, the NSW state government. If the unions were serious about wanting to achieve justice for their members, they would unite all workers in a general strike.

Since the early 1980s when the Hawke/Keating government worked with the unions to implement the reactionary Australia Reconstructed program, tying unions to the government and capitalist state, unions have been transformed into nothing less than industrial police, who enforce government and business decisions within the working class. This sabotage is reflected most acutely in the dwindling number of workers in unions.

I urge Chris O'Brien Life House workers to form a rank-and-file committee to take their struggle forward. I offer heartfelt solidarity to them.

Gary, a junior doctor in Queensland

I fully support the efforts of nurses at Chris O'Brien Lifehouse to reject the sell-out EBA advanced by the NSW Nurses and Midwives' Association, which would have only seen their wages fall further against rampant inflation and conditions worsen.

The nurses at Lifehouse perform a role that can only be described as essential. Cancer patients are among the sickest and most vulnerable people and treating them requires special dedication and resilience. The COVID pandemic has increased the demands upon these nurses, as cancer patients have had treatment delayed and denied while remaining particularly vulnerable to the virus. The nurses themselves often have been victims to COVID and Long COVID.

The open letter notes that the NSWNMA has "ceded the narrative to management" on wages through its "neutrality" on the EBA. The union is not neutral. It is refusing to fight for its members and has enforced wage cuts, understaffing and refused to provide COVID safety for health workers and patients.

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Rejecting the sellout contract is a necessary step forward for not only the nurses at Lifehouse but health workers more broadly. We must join the actions of nurses in launching an independent defense of wages and conditions and develop demands based on what we actually need, not the dictates of employers and their union accomplices.

A medical specialist from a major public hospital in NSW

The Lifehouse nurses' open letter is significant because it's the first time I know of when a group of nurses have come together and said, this situation isn't OK for us, and they are questioning, "who represents us?"

It's not the private company, Lifehouse, but it's also not the union, because they have said you make your own decisions, so who represents the workers? As conditions, pay and staff morale are failing, workers are saying that this isn't good enough, that "something is going to change and we are going to make that change."

The NSWMA is saying you make up your own minds, that's not the principle of collective bargaining, is it? Collective bargaining says "all for one and one for all." So, if there is no unity provided by the union, workers are going to have to say, "we will have to do it by ourselves," and that is what's happening.

I think you will see more of that. I think there is an increasing mood for dissent.

The privatisation of health services such as at Lifehouse is also part of the problem. What you have is socialising the losses and privatising the profits. They are not privatising hospitals outright because that wouldn't garner support, however departments within hospitals, including my hospital, are being privatised. They are doing it by stealth.

I know a patient at Lifehouse who has myeloma and is receiving chemotherapy. He is capable of receiving the chemotherapy at home, however he is made to come in to Lifehouse twice weekly on public transport because, if they administer the chemotherapy on site, they receive more funding. They can bill the government for the administration on site at a higher rate. Not-for-profit does not equate to not motivated by profit.

The other thing I hope will happen will be that people will come out of their "silos." We are starting to see cross-supporting, like doctors supporting nurses on strike, or teachers supporting nurses. Workers have a common enemy in the government and the corporations.

Teachers, nurses and rail workers are going out and hopefully they will start to support each other. I am talking about general strikes. I think that is what should happen. All workers should support all workers.



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