

Australia: The way forward for striking New South Wales nurses

Health Workers Rank-and-File Committee
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On Wednesday, some 50,000 public sector nurses and midwives across New South Wales (NSW) are striking for 24-hours in their fifth statewide stoppage this year.

Nurses are demanding shift-by-shift nurse-to-patient ratios, staffing increases and are opposing state government demands that they accept a massive pay cut. The vote by nurses to strike, by 94 percent, is an expression of their determination to fight under conditions of a complete breakdown of the healthcare system, which has been brought to the brink by the “let it rip” COVID policies of all governments.

The Health Workers Rank-and-File Committee (HWRFC) stands full square behind the striking nurses. But we warn that another limited, union-controlled stoppage will resolve nothing. The horrendous conditions confronting nurses—including gruelling shifts, massive understaffing, pay that does not even keep up with inflation and the continuous threat of COVID infection—will only worsen.

As in every previous strike, the union is dividing nurses up, with different rallies at different times of the day. The NSW Nurses and Midwives’ Association (NSWNMA) is determined to prevent a unified mobilisation of nurses, much less all health workers, or the hundreds of thousands of public sector workers who face identical attacks on their jobs, wages and living conditions.

The HWRFC is putting forward a genuine fighting perspective, in opposition to these union attempts to let off workers’ anger, while blocking any real struggle.

Nurses, and all other workers, must draw a balance sheet of their struggle. It will show that at every step of the way, the NSWNMA has isolated and divided them, while appealing to the Liberal-National government and fostering illusions in the pro-business Labor Party.

That is because the NSWNMA, like every other union, is not a workers’ organisation in any real sense of the term. Instead it is a corporatised agency of governments and company managements, determined to impose the dictates of big business and the banks for the working class to pay for the capitalist crisis.

The HWRFC calls on nurses to take matters into their own hands by forming rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions, that workers themselves control. That is the only means

of uniting nurses with other healthcare workers, and turning out to other workers.

The HWRFC, together with the Committee for Public Education, is fighting for a joint struggle by educators and health workers, two key sections of the working class on the frontlines of the “let it rip” COVID catastrophe and the associated onslaught on pay and conditions.

The urgency of nurses striking out on a new path is demonstrated by the NSWNMA’s clear preparations to inflict yet another sell-out industrial agreement that will not resolve a single issue they face.

The sharpest warning is the union’s attempt to transform the nurses’ struggle into an adjunct of the Labor Party’s campaign for the March NSW state election.

In September, NSWNMA general secretary Shaye Candish and assistant general secretary Michael Whaites appeared beside state opposition leader Chris Minns at a press conference to promote Labor’s platform of pro-business health “reforms” ahead of the March 2023 election.

Labor’s platform does not include legislated nurse-to-patient ratios, a key demand of nurses. In May this year, Labor explicitly rejected a recommendation from a parliamentary inquiry for mandated nurse-to-patient ratios, on the basis that there were no “up-to-date costings.”

Labor’s announcement included nothing on nurses’ pay demands of 7 percent. Minns, moreover, has repeatedly denounced striking workers and made clear that any, even marginal and below inflation public sector wage increases must be tied to “productivity,” that is more onerous working conditions and greater exploitation.

NSW Labor’s program is fully in line with the pro-business agenda being implemented by the federal Labor government of Prime Minister Anthony Albanese. The mantra of the Albanese government is that working people must “make sacrifices” to reduce the national debt, by accepting below inflation pay rises and the further destruction of crucial social services.

Labor’s federal budget, brought down in October, contained sweeping attacks on public healthcare, amounting to \$755 million this financial year and \$2.4 billion over four years. Meanwhile, Labor is pressing ahead with tax cuts for the ultra-wealthy and a massive increase in military expenditure in

preparation for an aggressive, US-led war with China.

Albanese's program is no aberration. For decades, Labor governments have spearheaded an assault on public healthcare and education, aimed at subordinating them to the private market and slashing government expenditure on behalf of big business. For decades, the unions have served as the crucial enforcers of this agenda, which they are now stepping up to a new level.

Recent events in Western Australia (WA) are a stark warning of what the NSWMA would like to inflict on NSW nurses.

In WA last week, the Australian Nurses Federation (ANF) attempted to force through a sell-out agreement with the McGowan state Labor government, which is pushing for annual pay increases of just 3 percent and has made no concrete commitments on nurse to patient ratio. The ANF only backed away from the deal, for the time being, after its sellout plans provoked mass anger among the workers it falsely claims to represent.

More broadly, all of the unions, including the NSWMA are enforcing the "let it rip" COVID policies, currently being presided over by the federal Labor government, with the support of all the state and territory administrations. Under this "forever COVID" program, there is to be wave after wave of infection, with the schools functioning as vectors of mass transmission and the hospitals continuously overwhelmed. This anti-scientific and homicidal agenda is motivated solely by the demands of the corporate elite that the economy remain "open" to ensure maximum profit-making activities continue.

In every sector, in Australia and internationally, there is a growing mood of struggle and opposition by workers. But in all cases, they come up against the trade unions, which function as a police force of governments and the corporations.

The unions' suppression of workers' struggles is paving the way for provocations and aggressive attacks on fundamental rights. Last Friday, maritime unions celebrated a ruling from the Fair Work Commission banning all industrial action by Svitser tugboat workers. The nurse and teacher unions have accepted fines totalling more than \$100,000 this year for "illegal" strikes without a word to members, in order to prevent demands from workers for a fight against these penalties.

The unions are enthusiastically promoting the federal Labor government's proposed new industrial relations legislation, which aims to "de-escalate disputes" by putting even more roadblocks in the way of workers taking strike action, and stepping up the powers of the industrial courts to intervene and impose pro-business agreements.

The only way forward is the establishment of independent rank-and-file committees in all hospitals, schools and workplaces, to defeat the sell-out plans of the unions, circulate information, organise democratic discussions and prepare a genuine industrial and political counter-offensive.

As part of this struggle, nurses and other sections of workers should formulate their own demands, based on what they need,

not what governments and big business claim is affordable. The HWRFC proposes the following demands as a starting point:

- Mandatory and enforced minimum nurse-to-patient ratios throughout hospitals, as determined democratically by health workers themselves based on what is required.
- An immediate across-the-board pay increase of more than 20 percent, with automatic monthly cost of living adjustments.
- Implement public health measures to combat COVID-19, including the provision of free, high-quality N95s or better for all staff and adequate ventilation/air filtration, as part of a broader program to eliminate the virus.
- Immediate hiring of thousands of health workers to end the current punishing workloads.
- Massively expand spending on public health and education. End the privatisation of essential social services

These demands can and must be won. But they raise the necessity for a political struggle against the unions, all of the governments, Labor and Liberal-National alike and the industrial courts.

The catastrophe facing healthcare workers, like their counterparts in education, points inescapably to the need for a struggle for the reorganisation of society as a whole. The situation in the hospitals will only deteriorate, so long as healthcare is subordinated to the profit demands of big business and the austerity agenda of the governments that represent it.

The HWRFC advances the fight for workers' governments that would implement socialist policies, including placing the banks and the major corporations under public ownership and democratic workers' control, and providing the necessary billions to ensure high-quality public healthcare for all, and decent pay and conditions for those who work in this crucial sector.

Contact us today to get involved.

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