

Australia: Union prepares sell-out deal with New South Wales government as nurses strike

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On Wednesday, thousands of public sector nurses took part in a statewide strike in New South Wales (NSW), with rallies or walkouts in 29 locations. The workers are demanding minimum shift-by-shift nurse to patient ratios and increased staffing to deal with the chronic underfunding and overcrowding in the hospitals. They are also opposing the state government's demands for a massive real wage cut.

The nurses defied the decision of the NSW Industrial Relations Commission (IRC), which ruled the strike illegal on Monday night. This is the third time the IRC has attempted to shut down striking nurses after ruling against the February 15 and March 31 strikes and the third time nurses have courageously refused to back down.

The determination of nurses to fight is, however, running up against a union bureaucracy that is doing everything possible to wrap up the dispute and ram through a sell-out deal.

Speaking at the Sydney rally, NSW Nurses and Midwives' Association (NSWNMA) Assistant General Secretary Michael Whaites promoted illusions that the strike could pressure the Liberal-National government into shifting its position on staffing and wages. He said that, because of the "action today, we have a meeting with the health minister and the minister of finance tomorrow."

In a video posted to Facebook yesterday, Whaites and NSWNMA General Secretary Shaye Candish described this meeting in glowing terms. Reporting that "discussions were productive" and "very promising," Candish uttered not a single word of criticism of a government that is completely hostile to nurses and their demands.

Whaites declared he was looking "forward to hopefully having something to bring you out of our discussions today." In other words, the NSWNMA is preparing to present workers with a government offer containing minimal concessions but resolving none of the

fundamental issues confronting nurses, which it will present to workers as the best they can hope for.

Candish also claimed Labor was "on board for five areas of our ratios claim," indicating that NSWNMA will encourage workers to accept a substandard deal on the phony premise that a Labor government will resolve their issues if elected next year.

On November 14, nurses and midwives voted overwhelmingly in favour of strike action, as they have for all the industrial action this year. There is ongoing and widespread anger over the horrendous conditions facing workers in hospitals, including gruelling hours, unrelenting workloads, declining real wages and the ongoing risk of COVID-19 infection.

In Sydney, around 1,500 health workers marched from Hyde Park to a rally in Martin Place. In the regional cities of Newcastle and Tweed Heads there were around 200 and 50 workers respectively. Hundreds of other nurses participated in other regional locations.

Speeches by union officials were limited to pleas for political parties to listen to nurses, the line put forward since the first strike in February. Again, sole blame for the crisis was laid at the feet of Premier Dominic Perrottet and the NSW Liberal-National government.

O'Bray Smith, president of the NSWNMA, set the tone, saying she "can't wait to vote [Perrottet] out at the next election." Smith claimed Labor had "offered us an increase to safe staffing in five different areas," but signalled they will negotiate with anyone: "Labor should not rest... If the Liberals come out and offer us a better deal, we will vote that way."

As with every previous strike, the NSWNMA divided health workers by limiting the action to public sector nurses and midwives.

NSWNMA members working in the private sector were excluded, as were other health workers not covered by the union. There was no call by the union to mobilise the

hundreds of thousands of other workers in other industries who face similar attacks on their jobs and conditions.

The issue of the pandemic was completely buried at the rallies, with COVID largely referred to in the past tense. This is in contrast to the experiences of health workers, who see patients die from the disease every day and who are at constant risk of infection themselves.

These conditions are only set to worsen as the population is being told it must live with “forever COVID.” New wave of infections will overwhelm the hospitals, which are already at breaking point.

This homicidal and anti-scientific “let it rip” policy is spearheaded by Labor and the Anthony Albanese federal government with the full support of the unions, including the NSWNMA.

No concrete wage demand was raised at the rallies or in the video, in a further indication that what is being orchestrated by the NSWNMA is another sell-out agreement that will not resolve a single issue health workers face.

At the rallies, the NSWNMA bureaucracy attempted to direct the anger of health workers towards the election of a Labor government in the March 2023 state election. The “commitment” of NSW Labor opposition leader Chris Minns to “safe staffing levels” was hailed as a great victory. In fact, Minns has refused to legislate staff ratios, something promised by Labor in 2019 but subsequently abandoned.

Now, Labor is promising to implement shift-by-shift ratios in ICU, Emergency Departments, Maternity Wards, Multi-Purpose Services (MPSs) and general wards. The plan does not include minimum ratios for paediatrics services. The reality is that mandatory ratios mean nothing without a mass hiring campaign to address chronic staff shortages.

NSW Labor’s program is completely in line with the pro-business agenda of the federal Labor government, which is carrying out the dictates of the corporate elite, including sweeping attacks on public spending.

Labor’s federal budget, unveiled in October, contains a massive attack on public health, including slashing \$755 million in public health spending this financial year and \$2.4 billion over four years, while pressing ahead with tax cuts for the ultra-wealthy.

This is a continuation of decades of cutbacks to health by Labor governments at the state and federal level, which are directly responsible for the crisis in the hospitals.

Recent events in Western Australia provide a stark

warning of what is being prepared for nurses in NSW. Last week, the Australian Nurses Federation (ANF) attempted to force through a sell-out agreement negotiated with the McGowan state Labor government, which is pushing for a 3 percent annual pay increase and no commitment on staff ratios.

Only after health workers overwhelming rejected the proposal did the union back away from the deal. Today WA nurses are engaging in a 24-hour strike, despite the IRC in WA ruling it illegal. The ANF has made clear it is preparing to sell out its members.

The lessons of these experiences, and that of the year of strike action in NSW, much be drawn. No amount of courage and determination will compel the union to take up the genuine demands of health workers and improve conditions. This is because the unions are not workers’ organisations, but bureaucratic apparatuses that serve governments and big business.

To avoid the sell-out being prepared by the NSWNMA, nurses and midwives must take action into their own hands. This means breaking with the unions and the Labor Party. Health workers must link their struggles with their counterparts in education, rail and other industries.

Only the Health Workers Rank-and-File Committee (HWRFC) is fighting for such a program. It advances the need for a political struggle against these organisations and the industrial courts that seek to straitjacket workers.

Above all, what is needed is for workers to take up a fight to establish workers’ governments to implement socialist policies. This includes placing the major corporations and banks under the democratic control and ownership of the working class, in order to provide the resources to make healthcare of the highest quality freely available to all.



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