

# Australia: NSW nurses speak on crisis in healthcare at fourth state-wide strike

Our reporters

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Thousands of public sector nurses in the state of New South Wales (NSW) took part in a state-wide strike on Wednesday.

In a long-running industrial dispute with the NSW state government, they are demanding nurse to patient ratios to deal with the overcrowding in hospitals and unrelenting workload due to the gutting of funding to public health and massive staff shortage. Workers are also demanding pay increases to offset rampant inflation.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) campaigned among workers at strike rallies. The SEP raised the broader political issues, including the role of all of the official parties and the unions in enforcing a homicidal “let it rip” COVID policy that has brought the already crisis-ridden public healthcare system to a breaking point.

The SEP warned the NSWNMA, which has isolated nurses for the best part of a year, is now preparing to impose a sell-out deal that would resolve nothing. SEP campaigners called for nurses to take matters into their own hands by forming independent rank-and-file committees and uniting with other sections of workers, in health, education and more broadly.

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**Victoria**, a first-year nursing student nurse whose mother is also a nurse, told the WSWs that students “do lots of placements and I’ve found that on placement we have been used to fill in short staffing. They use us but we have little to no experience, which is not safe for us, not safe for the patients, not safe for anyone.

Speaking on the ending of a mandatory isolation period for COVID infected individuals, Victoria said, “COVID has absolutely made things worse ... now they want more people to come back to work rather than being home and taking the time off that they need, which isn’t safe. This serves the hospitals and management so they can pay less by having their full-time employees back instead of being at home rather than having to pay agency workers or temporary staff who have double pay rates.”

The WSWs explained that NSW Labor leader Chris Minns has opposed mandated staffing ratios. “I think it’s horrible. It shows that they don’t really care,” Victoria said.

On the cuts to healthcare by the federal Labor government in its recent budget she commented: “They put so much money

into their own back pockets and into things like coal mining and oils and unsustainable energy and taking that money from nursing and from healthcare where it needs to be. I think that budget needs to be reviewed and I think they need to get their priorities in order.

“Workers should be sticking together. Nurses, teachers, rail workers, we all get paid crap. We all get disrespected by the government. I think teaming up would be a great idea. I think all health workers as well should team up.”

On the issue of making a break with the union bureaucracy and nurses establishing their own rank and file committees, Victoria said, “I’m not very educated on that, so I can’t give you a really in-depth answer. But it makes sense to me. If you keep getting let down by the support system that’s supposed to help you, what else are you supposed to do?”

**Rumbidzai**, a nurse working in an aged care ward in **Liverpool Hospital**, said, “Most of the time we’re short-staffed. I think I receive five to six messages every day asking for staff to do overtime. We hardly ever take breaks because it’s very busy.

“It was like that before COVID. Then when COVID came along, everything just became worse. Most nurses have left or moved to Queensland and other states. We are left with a skeleton staff.

“People are being neglected. I’ve gone to shifts where you don’t get to change someone’s bed. They’re just sitting in a soiled bed for four hours. It’s unacceptable.”

The WSWs explained the need for rank-and-file committees, and uniting workers in an international struggle, and she responded, “Yes, definitely. The first strike we had, I think we had teachers and ambulance services. We need a united strike, all strike at the same time. I would love that.”

**Paul**, a nurse from the regional hospital in Yass, attended the rally in Sydney and spoke on an incident where a paramedic was asked to suddenly work due to a staffing crisis: “We got to a point where we just didn’t have any nurses to work in the hospital due to sickness, due to leave and just generally due to burnout and fatigue.

“The executive thought their only option was to staff the hospital with a paramedic, essentially asking somebody to work completely out of their scope of practice.

“It’s a structured process that you must go through to be credentialed to work as an emergency department nurse. This paramedic had none of that. As a result, any patients that came in were put at risk due to the lack of provisional supports. The executive decided to do this instead of shutting the department.”

On the impact of COVID in rural hospitals Paul said, “It’s brought to the surface a lot of problems that have always been there. It’s tripled our workload; we burn through more staff. Things were bad before, but they’re even worse now. A lot of these patients that came with respiratory symptoms had to be nursed in isolation. Often, we needed the extra staff to do that, which we don’t have.

“Do I think COVID is over? Not by a long shot. The government keeps saying it’s over, but it’s not. We’re still nursing patients who have COVID, we’re still trying to isolate them, and we’re still dealing with particularly unwell patients because of COVID.”

The WSWs asked Paul what he thought about the need for unified action of workers. He replied: “I agree with that. Why has that not been called? I don’t know. That’s a question. This is just the beginning, I think. We should have ongoing strikes, hopefully combined strikes with other unions as well.”

In Newcastle, **Claudia** spoke about the attack on Western Australian nurses by the McGowan Labor government in that state and the fines against nurses in NSW for striking, which the NSW NMA paid without informing its membership.

She stated: “It’s like a dictatorship. What happened to freedom of speech? The year before last, we did a half-day strike and my manager went out on strike with us, and she got into trouble. She hasn’t gone out with us since, so if that’s not like a dictatorship I don’t know what is. There are other staff who have been stopped from striking in a similar way.

“Conditions are so bad, people have been leaving nursing hand over fist. Older nurses leave five-to-ten years earlier than they anticipated. Young nurses who are just registered are lucky to see one-to-two years post registration.

“I joined the union 28 years ago when I started nursing. It was known as being the weakest union. Our action has only recently stepped up, but it took a crisis for this to happen. They’ve had 28 years of my fees for basically nothing. We need a plan and discussion on what needs to be done.”

**Hattia**, a community nurse also at the Newcastle rally, said, “I support the Western Australian nurses. I think it’s poor that they’ve been gagged and that it’s a Labor government. I didn’t know that. I also didn’t know that there were fines against the union here, that’s terrible. We have a right to strike. The fines shouldn’t have been paid.”

A **nurse** from Cessnock Hospital in rural NSW who asked to remain anonymous said she had been working for eight years. The impact of COVID had been disastrous. “We used to have a COVID clinic, but now we don’t have that anymore. Now we must do a screen for COVID in the Emergency Department

(ED). If they test for COVID they stay in ED, unless they get in a private room, but we have only four private rooms in Cessnock. Nearly every night we have someone with COVID because we don’t have enough room. They can’t go to the toilet because there’s only one in ED, so we need to rotate bedpans.”

The nurse described how she must ring emergency doctors when on shift due to lack of staff. They “can be anywhere,” she said “I’ve talked to people in Belfast, England, Scotland, Wales, America, Saudi Arabia... and we never get the same doctor twice. We had an incident with a resuscitation and couldn’t get someone on the line for 45 minutes. He was resuscitated by nurses, without a doctor. That’s where we are at.

“Labor’s latest budget is not fair. The government doesn’t care or see us as important. There’s been such a long-term, right-wing shift in Australian politics. We don’t get pay rises as our wage rises are below the inflation line.”

**Eliza**, the union branch president at Murwillumbah Hospital, said: “The government is not listening to us. We have been striking for a year now, trying to get ratios. They keep telling us to stop our strike action.”

Asked about the resurgence of COVID-19, let loose by governments, Eliza commented, “We are getting peaks of COVID, and they keep warning us when the peaks come but the hospitals fill up when that happens. We have to find room and care for the patients and we don’t have the staff to cope with that at the moment.”

Asked if a NSW Labor government would be any better, Eliza answered: “I honestly don’t know. I hope so, but at the moment it doesn’t look like it.” When told that the Albanese government’s first budget last month had included a cut of \$2.4 billion in public hospital funding over the next four years, she said: “Wow, that’s a big drop. That’s not going to cover nurses. That’s not going to cover the care we need to give patients. We’re short 300 staff for this hospital, and it hasn’t even opened yet!”

Asked about the perspective of forming rank-and-file committees, Eliza responded: “The more people that get behind it, the more chance we have, so it’s a good idea... We’re being ignored. We are being kept separate. We should all get together.”



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