

Sydney private hospital nurses speak out against wage cuts and understaffing

Our reporters

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Private hospital nurses at St. Vincent's Hospital and Mater Hospital held one-hour stop work meetings yesterday in protest against management's attempt to impose real wage cuts as part of the current Enterprise Bargaining Agreement being negotiated with the New South Wales Nurses and Midwives' Association (NSWNMA).

The union was forced to hold the stop work after nurses rejected management's offer of a 3.75 percent wage increase, a wage cut when compared with inflation of nearly 8 percent. Nurses at St. Vincent's public hospital, which is on the same block as the private hospital, attended the stop work in solidarity with the private nurses' struggle.

Some nurses expressed the hope, fraudulently promoted by the unions, that voting for the Labor Party in next year's NSW state election will improve their conditions. NSW Labor leader Chris Minns has refused to commit to nurse to patient ratios and has stated that any wage increases in the public sector must be linked to "productivity."

Reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to both private and public nurses from St. Vincent's Hospital.

Afaf, a newly graduated registered nurse at St. Vincent private hospital, said: "All nurses in the public and private [sector] are getting it really hard. There's a lot of nurses who have come from England and they told me their conditions are much worse than ours, so it is international. This is why the strike is important because people do need to see that we are struggling everywhere, and improvements need to happen internationally, not just here.

"Everyone needs to work together to help all health workers, not just nurses. I know doctors are struggling as well, we are all struggling. There are times we don't

have any administrators, so nurses need to do the job of not just nursing but working in admission, and we are cleaners as well. We are short in all areas: cleaners, kitchen staff, everyone. There is no isolation, if there is an improvement with the nurses there will be an improvement for everyone else.

"The year I've been working here has been quite challenging with the ratios. It's been hard for me to get a proper education and the necessities I need as a new graduate. I'm here to help so that hopefully next year the new nurses that come will get the support they need.

"It's extremely challenging. The number of things that are required from us is beyond what I expected. We have a ratio of one nurse per six patients, which is unmanageable sometimes with the conditions that patients come in with post-surgery. Sometimes we are with a patient for a whole hour forgetting about the five others who have pretty much the same conditions, which is not fair, and it tires us out. An eight-hour shift can easily become a 10-hour shift. The least we can ask for is a pay rise, but the teachers deserve one as well, they also took a hit during COVID."

Mei, an emergency nurse at St. Vincent public hospital, came to show her solidarity with the private hospital nurses. She said: "It doesn't matter where you work, public or private, we are nurses, we do the same job, we deliver care to patients, and we face the same crisis. Patients don't get the right care because there are not enough nurses on the floor."

Mei explained that in some wards the nurse-to-patient ratio is 1:8 in the private hospital and 1:6 in the public: "It's not safe. When the patients come in, they don't get the right care because nurses have to run around for 8 different people. You can't meet everyone's needs. Some patients have to wait an hour for a drink. The

patients in the elderly ward can't shower themselves. How can you rush that in just 5 minutes? So, you have to cut it back and just wet them and then dry them and that's it.

"In emergency, the longer patients wait the more they deteriorate. If they are in pain, that will get worse and they will get angry and lash out. It is a risk for the nurses who can get bashed up. That happens every day here because we have a lot of patients who are under the influence of drugs and so are not themselves.

"Some of the nurses are replaced with nursing assistants who are not trained, don't know what is right, what the dangers are, how to monitor the early warning signs that someone is deteriorating. If someone has chest pain, they may only have 10 minutes before they get some sort of brain damage."

Asked what she thought of the Albanese Labor government's decision to cut \$2.4 billion from funding for public hospitals, Mei said: "We are already struggling. With this cut we won't have the right number of doctors and nurses in the hospital so patient's stays will have to be cut short. The minute we admit a patient we are planning their discharge. This premature discharge is going to make the patient relapse, which means they return to hospital and so it will double the cost from one to two presentations for each patient."

Mei agreed with a united struggle of all health care workers. "One person is not enough but if we are united it will make our voice stronger."

Referring to the rising cost-of-living, Mei added, "Everything is so expensive. I needed \$100 to shop in the past, now I need \$200."

A night shift nurse with more than a decade of experience in the private sector said: "I had 10 patients last night and I was literally run off my feet for most of the night. This is an issue that we have been campaigning about for years. Night ratios in particular are not safe. We get anywhere between 8 to 10 patients per nurse. We get patients from theatre late at night. We don't have as many resources as during the day and it is really hard to look after our patients. We are worried about patient safety because we can't get around to people in time.

"The doctors are supportive of us. They agree with the need for better ratios and have voiced their support. The issue is management because they aren't listening

to us or the doctors. It has reached the point that we have to stand in the park and shout to get their attention.

"They wanted to offer us a 3 percent wage rise, but with inflation at 7 percent it isn't enough. A lot of the people who work here have to travel in because none of us can afford to live in the inner city anymore. A lot are younger, have families, live in Penrith, Parramatta, Blacktown. They have to drive or get public transport in. It's not cheap for fuel, it costs \$100 for a tank and if you have kids and have to drive them around it all adds up. Some are paying school fees as well, so a 3 percent pay rise does nothing for us."



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