

Australia: New South Wales health workers protest Labor's inaction on wage cap

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Health workers held stop-work meetings at three hospitals in northern New South Wales (NSW) this week, demanding an end to the state's punitive public sector wage cap.

The cap limits annual nominal wage rises for all public sector workers to 2.5 percent (temporarily increased to 3 percent by the Coalition), far below the official inflation rate of 7 percent.

Members of the Health Services Union (HSU), which covers paramedics, radiographers, orderlies, cleaners, security, catering workers and administrative staff, walked off the job briefly at public hospitals in Tweed Heads on Tuesday, Lismore on Wednesday and Coffs Harbour on Thursday.

These stoppages were limited affairs, tightly stage-managed by the HSU bureaucracy. A press release announcing the walkouts was published less than 24 hours before the first action at Tweed, where workers received no advance notice at all.

In addition to the northern NSW stoppages, patient transport workers across the state carried out a "snap" 21-hour strike on Friday April 28. Security workers at Royal Prince Alfred Hospital in Sydney's inner west also staged a two-hour stop work meeting on Tuesday.

The small and isolated stoppages were designed by the HSU bureaucracy to give workers the illusion of forward motion on wages and conditions and to subdue demands for more substantial action.

This approach is nothing new. Last year, amid the highest level of industrial action in Australia for more than a decade, predominantly by NSW public sector workers, the HSU bureaucracy held perfunctory stop-work meetings of just a few hours. In a comment revealing the HSU's cynical role in shutting down opposition among workers to the decades-long assault on jobs, pay and conditions in the sector, HSU NSW Secretary Gerard Hayes described this as letting workers "off the leash."

Labor's pledge to remove the wage cap was heavily promoted by the unions in the lead-up to the March 25 state election. Premier Chris Minns acknowledged this on election night, declaring, "the people of New South Wales voted for the removal of the unfair wages cap."

Now, more than a month later, these stoppages reflect a growing sentiment among workers opposing Labor's failure to

carry out this promise. Hayes said last week, "NSW Labor was elected with significant expectations. They need to get moving on fulfilling them."

Even before the election, Minns and Treasurer Daniel Mookhey made clear that they had no plans to raise wages to the level of inflation. Instead, they reassured big business they would maintain "targets" of 3 to 3.5 percent nominal wage growth.

Just to lift real wages to June 2021 levels, let alone make up for earlier cuts, NSW public sector workers need a pay rise of more than 10 percent. In other words, even if they ostensibly remove the wage cap, Labor will deliver further massive cuts to real wages throughout the public sector.

This program is agreed with and accepted by the entire union apparatus, as was demonstrated by the Rail Tram and Bus Union's claim to have "smashed the NSW Government's unfair 'wages cap'," after securing pay rises amounting to less than 4 percent per annum for rail workers earlier this year.

The HSU is likewise preparing to enforce yet another cut to health workers' real pay, through negotiations for a new industrial award, which is due to take effect in July. The union continues to promote "scrapping the wage cap" as a panacea in order to cover over the fact that it is not actually advancing a concrete wage demand, and will likely hail anything above 3 percent as a "victory."

Even the promise of this meagre increase is looking increasingly shaky since the election. While restating the government's "intention" to end the wage cap, Mookhey last month reiterated the need for wages to be linked to "productivity gains and budget savings."

Mookhey's comments came as the Labor government announced that the state budget would be delayed until September to allow time for a "line-by-line" spending review. In other words, Labor is looking for ways to deepen cuts to social spending and public sector jobs, potentially including more than 1,100 temporary nurse roles established in the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The budget will now not be announced until well after negotiations are due to be finalised for awards covering workers in the HSU, as well as more than 50,000 public sector nurses and midwives covered by the NSW Nurses and

Midwives Association (NSWNMA). This creates the conditions for the unions and the state industrial tribunal to insist that there is no money to support a larger pay claim.

Nurses and midwives work alongside the health workers covered by the HSU every day and have been subjected to similar attacks on wages and conditions for decades, sharply exacerbated by the ongoing pandemic. But the unions will do everything in their power to prevent a joint struggle, just as they did across multiple strikes last year.

Throughout the country and around the world, health workers face chronic staff shortages, low pay, long hours and gruelling conditions, but the unions are desperate to keep any actions as small and localised as possible.

HSU Secretary Hayes declared last week, “It’s no coincidence we have launched this action in the Tweed. Our hospital members here only need to jump across the border to Queensland and they can enjoy superior wages and better conditions.”

But the reality is that in Queensland, just as in NSW and throughout the country, health workers are poorly paid, burnt out and leaving the public health system. Following revelations of widespread payroll errors spanning eight years, Health Minister Yvette D’Ath admitted in March that underpayments to health workers “could be in the millions.”

Despite the removal by federal and state Labor governments of virtually all public health measures, including testing and reporting, hospitals still face an influx of COVID-19 patients every day, straining resources and putting workers at constant risk.

Every union in the country has played a critical role in enforcing catastrophic “let it rip” pandemic policies, ensuring workers remained on the job throughout. Hayes has been at the forefront of this, repeatedly denouncing work-from-home measures and even demanding an end to isolation requirements for infected health workers.

This claim that the struggles of health workers ends at the NSW border is a continuation of the lies promoted by all the health unions throughout the past year. This serves two purposes for the bureaucracy: First, to characterise the parlous state of the health system and the dire wages and conditions workers face as solely the fault of the Liberal-Nationals, and second, to prevent any unified struggle by workers throughout the country.

The NSWNMA leadership is working hard to reinforce the fairytale that the struggle is over. On Friday, Assistant Secretary Michael Whaites told members “the future is bright.” He explained: “We fought hard last year to make sure that we had a government in New South Wales that is committed to delivering change.”

While Hayes and the HSU bureaucracy gently criticise Labor for “dragging their feet,” the purpose of these limited stoppages is to promote the conception that workers’ struggles can be won through plaintive appeals to a pro-business government

with an agenda of budget austerity.

Such illusions were expressed in the HSU’s recent “Reform Critical” report, which claimed, “Neither NSW or Australia needs to spend more on health care.” This is the line of the Labor governments and their austerity offensive. In reality, there should be tens of billions more for healthcare and other social necessities such as education.

Despite citing “over twenty reviews and inquiries into the health system over the past four decades - which have continually failed to deliver fundamental reform,” the report called for a federal Royal Commission into the health system.

Health workers do not need another inquiry to tell them what they see every day—staff shortages, low wages and dire conditions. The unions and the state and federal Labor governments know this just as well. The continual degradation of the public health system is not the product of bad information, but the deliberate slashing of social spending by successive governments in line with the profit demands of the corporate and financial elite.

None of this would have been possible without the assistance of the unions, which serve big business and the capitalist state as an industrial police force, imposing the demands of management and shutting down workers’ opposition to the assault.

The struggle for real improvements to wages and conditions in health requires a fight to build rank-and-file committees in every hospital, bringing together workers from all departments. Through these committees, health workers can reach out to broader layers of workers, including elsewhere among the 400,000-strong NSW public sector, as well as interstate and overseas.

Above all, the offensive against healthcare raises fundamental political questions, related to the very organisation of society itself. While there is no money to expand life-saving treatments and other essential services, such as education, governments hand hundreds of billions to the ultra-wealthy and the corporations in the form of tax breaks and direct subsidies. Hundreds of billions more are allocated to the military, to prepare for war.

That underscores the necessity for a socialist perspective, aimed at reorganising society from top to bottom. The major corporations and banks should be under public ownership and democratic workers’ control. Then there would be ample resources for healthcare, education and the other needs of working people.



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