

Australia: Nurses' union pushes through wage-slashing NSW Labor deal

Martin Scott
11 August 2023

The New South Wales Nurses and Midwives' Association (NSWNMA) reported Monday that 58 percent of public health branches in the state had voted to accept the Labor government's 4 percent nominal pay rise offer, a massive cut in real terms.

This is part of a broader assault on the pay and conditions of NSW public sector workers by the government. It comes just weeks after the Health Services Union (HSU) turned workers against each other to narrowly push through a \$3,502 pay "increase," which saw many receive an even larger cut to real wages than Labor's initial 4 percent offer.

Opposition to the deal among nurses is broader than that reflected in the 42 percent "no" vote. This result was engineered by the NSWNMA leadership, which adopted a "neutral" stance on the offer, while simultaneously taking every opportunity to promote Labor at state and federal level.

This, combined with the union's betrayal of multiple mass strikes by tens of thousands of nurses and midwives last year, sent a clear message to workers that there was no alternative but to accept the rotten deal.

While the government has made some vague commitments on the critical workload and patient safety issue of nurse-to-patient ratios, the imposition of further cuts to real wages will only exacerbate staff shortages. This means that, as in other states where "mandatory" ratios are in place, the lack of qualified nurses and midwives will mean they are frequently ignored or complied with through overtime and extra shifts.

Numerous other demands by health workers for improved working conditions are not addressed in the offer. Among the few "wins" claimed by the NSWNMA are provisions that reflect the dire current state of affairs: "Right to leave early or be paid overtime on night duty where meal breaks not provided," and "Improvements to current overtime meal allowance provisions."

These measures are a tacit admission from the union bureaucracy that the new Award will do little to resolve the chronic understaffing and excessive workload that sees nurses and midwives denied breaks and other existing rights on a regular basis.

Conscious of the substantial anger among nurses and midwives over yet another wage cut amid soaring inflation and interest rates, NSWNMA assistant general secretary Michael Whaites told the *Sydney Morning Herald* the close result "reflects the economic and political environment we find ourselves in."

Whaites noted, "This offer fell short of our 2023 award claim and for many, accepting the one-year offer was a reflection that they will take the 4 percent now, but more is needed."

In other words, many of those voting "yes" did so because, 1) they are under immense financial pressure after years of real wage cuts, overseen by the NSWNMA, compelling them to accept a nominal increase; and 2) the union has given them every reason to believe that a genuine struggle for decent wages and conditions is impossible.

Even the comment that "more is needed" is a distortion of reality, aimed at promoting the illusion that this is a tiny step in the right direction. In fact, with inflation officially at 6 percent and the real cost of living rising faster, the 4 percent offer will set nurses and midwives even further back.

The NSWNMA never intended the "2023 award claim" as anything more than a means of tricking nurses and midwives into believing that the bureaucracy was fighting for their demands. Key measures, including the question of pay, were included in the document and immediately brushed aside.

On May 9, the union stated on Facebook, "Members voted unanimously to endorse the 2023 Public Health System claim," which included a demand for a 10 percent

pay rise, along with shift-by-shift ratios and other improvements to conditions.

The 10 percent figure was mentioned in two posts the following day, and then *once* more in a June 6 graphic, which noted that Labor's 4 percent offer "is lower than the NSWNMA's claim of 10%." In the almost two months between that image and the ballot closing, the 10 percent demand was not raised at all.

NSWNMA secretary Shaye Candish said in July, "I share your disappointment and anger at the government's inadequate pay offer." But this is yet another attempt by Candish to channel that disappointment and anger into a plaintive appeal to Labor: "It's imperative that [the NSW government] improve upon their pitiful offer to frontline health workers.

On August 3, just before the ballot closed, the NSWNMA bluntly stated its "neutral" position on the 4 percent offer on Facebook in response to a question from worker asking for advice on how to vote. "The Association has not made a recommendation," it wrote. In plain English, the union was telling workers, "You're on your own."

One nurse wrote on Facebook that in her union branch, "We were not told what to vote but the undercurrent was [definitely] to say yes." She said members were told "the Ministry of Health will override the decision if no."

The NSWNMA's tacit endorsement of the offer was calculated to demoralise workers and minimise the "no" vote, allowing the union leadership to claim that most nurses and midwives did not want to fight for better pay and conditions.

Last year, tens of thousands of nurses and midwives carried out multiple statewide strikes, including mass rallies in Sydney and elsewhere. But their struggle was isolated from the beginning by the bureaucracy, who ensured that they were kept separate from those of private sector nurses and other health workers, as well as teachers and the broader public sector.

Workers were told that fighting for decent pay and conditions was impossible under the then Liberal-National state government, and the strikes were dissolved into a campaign to elect a Labor government.

This was always based on lies. Labor made clear before the election that it would not deliver wage increases in line with inflation, and would demand "productivity gains" in exchange for even nominal pay rises. This is not just the policy of NSW Labor, but of the Labor Party throughout the country, at both state and federal level.

This week, having delivered the ballot result Labor

needed, Candish and Whaites immediately began denouncing the offer they had just rammed through, in a cynical ploy aimed at covering up their role and aligning themselves with the prevailing sentiment among nurses and midwives. Since announcing the result on Monday, the union has made seven Facebook posts decrying the inadequacy of the deal.

This contemptuous about-face confirms that the operation conducted by the NSWNMA over the past 18 months can only be described as a betrayal.

Two conclusions must be drawn from this and from experiences of previous years. First, the union bureaucracy sits atop a powder keg—tens of thousands of nurses and midwives who are furious at having been sold out by the NSWNMA and by Labor, and who are determined to fight. Second, such a fight is impossible within the framework of the union apparatus.

This means health workers need to take matters into their own hands and build new organisations of struggle in every hospital and health facility. Rank-and-file committees, run by workers themselves, are the only means through which they can democratically prepare a plan of action to fight for the actual needs of workers and a top-quality public health system, not what Labor or the union leadership say is affordable.

Through these committees, nurses and midwives can link up with others throughout the NSW public sector, who have also been slugged with real pay cuts in recent weeks by a joint offensive of Labor and the unions.

This includes health workers covered by the HSU, who were betrayed by the union bureaucracy in an anti-democratic manoeuvre designed to shut down opposition to Labor's cuts by extracting a tiny pay increase for the lowest-paid workers, not from the state government, but from the wages of those earning slightly more.

A unified struggle involving public hospital workers across the state would be a powerful start, but it is only a start. Ultimately, what is required is a political struggle against Labor and the unions, and a fight for a socialist alternative to capitalism, under which even the most basic public needs, including health care and decent wages, are subordinated to the profit demands of big business and the banks.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact