

Australia: Lifehouse nurses, vote “no” to union sell-out! Form a rank-and-file committee to fight for decent wages and conditions!

Health Workers Rank-and-File Committee
22 August 2023

The Health Workers Rank-and-File Committee (HWRFC) urges nurses at Chris O’Brien Lifehouse in Sydney, New South Wales (NSW) to vote “no” to an enterprise agreement prepared by the NSW Nurses and Midwives Association (NSWNMA) and Lifehouse management, which would slash real wages and further entrench intolerable working conditions.

Nurses at the private facility have until August 28 to vote on the proposed agreement which has been negotiated behind closed doors by management and the NSWNMA.

There is no substantive difference between the current agreement and the deal that workers decisively voted down in September last year. The union already agreed to nurses receiving a pay rise of just 3 percent in 2022. In a year where the understated official inflation rate reached seven percent, that amounted to a massive pay cut.

Now, the union and management are seeking to lock in further wage reductions. In 2023, workers would still receive a meagre 3 percent pay rise. From September 2024, workers would receive a 4 percent pay “increase”—up from 2 percent in the initial agreement presented to workers. That is still likely to be below real increases to the cost of living, meaning further cuts.

The agreement still rejects nurses’ demands for overtime rates from missed meal breaks, 20 days family and domestic violence leave. The agreement also rejects paid pandemic leave and PPE allowance, and includes no other safety measures to protect workers from COVID-19.

The supposed 15 “improvements” to the agreement, of which just 4 have been added since the September vote, are of a pitiful character. They include no patient load for those in charge of the hospital, preference to be given for

leave requests for cultural and religious reasons and staffing absences to be filled by nurses of similar experience. The changes are either inconsequential, or so vague as to allow management to void them at any time.

The agreement now includes a nurse-to-patient ratio system from January 2024. But this is not worth the paper it is written on. In an outline of the supposed “highlights” of the new agreement, the NSWNMA acknowledges that staffing levels can be “temporarily” or “permanently increased or decreased in response to acuity, government service direction, or changes to health insurance...”

In other words, management can maintain whatever levels of staffing it wants.

In an email promoting the deal, the NSWNMA touted “member-won improvements,” even though there are none. “[W]e can recommend locking in what we have achieved so far in bargaining by voting Yes to the Agreement,” it proclaimed.

But even the union was compelled to admit to the woeful character of its own deal. “Having said this, it is important to acknowledge that the improved pay offer still does not meet the cost of living, and the ratios system proposed does contain management discretion in varying the ratios in certain circumstances,” the email stated. That is, the union is telling workers to vote for pay cuts and for a further management assault on conditions!

The NSWNMA is engaged in a classic operation of seeking to wear workers down. It is, essentially, presenting the same offer that nurses have already rejected and insisting that it is the “best they will get.”

Last September, 68 percent of nurses voted against the initial agreement. Nurses’ rejection of the deal followed the issuing of an open letter by some rank-and-file

Lifeshouse nurses to the NSWNMA. The letter urged workers to reject the offer, pointed out that the 3 percent per annum wage deal amounted to a pay cut and demanded that the union bureaucrats fight for nurses' interests.

The letter explained that accepting the proposal would cause "the greatest decrease in nurses' real wages in decades, and cannot be allowed to be promoted by Lifeshouse without union opposition." It emphasised that the majority of the demands from the NSWNMA's Log of Claims submitted to Lifeshouse have been unmet and insisted that the union call for a "no" vote. It denounced the NSWNMA's "neutral" stance on the EBA, calling the union out for "ceding the narrative to management."

The HWRFC supported the open letter as an important step forward for nurses, representing both the determination of workers to fight for their pay and conditions, and their recognition that this brings them into conflict with the NSWNMA bureaucracy. We warned, however, that the NSWNMA is far from "neutral."

That the posture of "neutrality" was a sham has been demonstrated in the course of events. The NSWNMA bureaucracy has worked hand-in-hand with management to drag out negotiations for almost a year, has held no industrial action and ignored the demands of nurses expressed in the open letter. Now, the union has presented an agreement which has no significant change to the previous deal.

This is because the unions are not workers' organisations in any sense of the term. Instead, they act as an industrial police force for governments and corporate managements.

The recent sell-out deals forced through by the NSWNMA and Health Services Union for health workers in the public sector stands as a stark warning of this.

This month, the NSWNMA reported 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. Opposition to the deal among nurses is broader than that reflected in the 42 percent "no" vote. The 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.

Similarly, in July, the HSU narrowly pushed through a \$3,502 pay "increase," which saw many receive an even larger cut to real wages than Labor's initial 4 percent offer. Almost half of the participating members voted to "continue industrial action to campaign for a bigger pay

rise," but the union used the result as a pretext to shut down the possibility of industrial action against Labor's real wage cuts.

The nurses' struggle at Lifeshouse has been kept separate from the struggles of NSW public sector nurses and other sections of health workers who face the same attack on pay and conditions.

The further assault on nurses' wages and conditions through the Lifeshouse union-management agreement must be rejected. But the fight for demands based on what nurses and health workers actually need, not what management says can be afforded, cannot be left in the hands of the NSWNMA.

These experiences pose the urgent need for workers at Lifeshouse and throughout the health sector to take matters into their own hands. This means the formation of rank-and-file committees, independent of the NSWNMA and democratically controlled by workers themselves. The Health Workers Rank and File Committee will offer every assistance in this process.

Such committees would develop the struggle against the agreement, share information and to begin to unite with health staff in the public hospitals and more broadly in a common struggle for improved wages and conditions, including ratios and safe staffing levels.

These committees would also have to take up a fight against the "let it rip" COVID policies imposed by all governments and the unions in the interests of profit. As long as the virus is allowed to spread unchecked, the situation in hospitals and medical facilities will continue to be a disaster. Wave after wave of patients will become ill and some will die. The same is true of nurses and other health workers.

Above all, what is needed is a genuine fight for high-quality, fully-funded public healthcare for all, and decent wages and conditions for all workers in the sector. That poses the need for a socialist perspective, which rejects the subordination of essential social services such as healthcare to the profit interests of the corporate and financial elite.

We urge health workers to contact us to discuss this perspective and the establishment of independent rank-and-file committees.



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