

Australia: Western Sydney health workers protest Israel's genocide in Gaza

Stephen Griffiths
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Around 80 health workers turned out in the rain for a vigil outside Westmead Hospital in Western Sydney last Friday night. It was the second time in a week that medical staff from the hospital and elsewhere protested against the genocide in Gaza and Israel's targeting of health workers.

According to news agency Al Jazeera, 220 health workers have been killed in Gaza since Israel's bombardment began on October 7 and at least 160 medical facilities have been fired on by the Israel Defense Forces.

A November 22 UN "Flash Update" noted that only two small hospitals in northern Gaza remained partially operational, with 22 out of service. In the south, only 7 of 11 hospitals were still functioning, of which only one had the capacity to perform critical trauma care and complex surgery.

At the Westmead event, the names and occupations of all the health workers killed during the Israeli onslaught were read out and a minute's silence held in memorial.

Health workers, many with Palestinian heritage, spoke of their relatives, friends and colleagues killed in the siege. One doctor spoke of how her father was born in Gaza during the Nakba, when their family was being driven from their home.

The vigil was led by Dr Safiyyah Abbas, one of the doctors who initiated a petition to the federal Labor government signed by more than 40,000 health workers.

She said "our common humanity can help us in transforming our feelings of helplessness and sadness into action. Together we can raise our voices for those being silenced and together our voices resonate loudly.

"On Wednesday there was an announcement of a deal for a 'pause' in fighting and this is far from adequate. I must repeat our demands to Prime Minister [Anthony]

Albanese and Foreign Minister [Penny] Wong.

"Firstly we demand an immediate and permanent ceasefire. We call for international law to be upheld and for the protection of our health worker colleagues, health care facilities, aid workers and journalists.

"We also demand the unfettered delivery of aid into Gaza including food, fuel, medical supplies and medical personnel."

Zara, a science student working towards becoming a doctor, came to the vigil with her mother, a general practitioner working in emergency.

She told *World Socialist Web Site* reporters: "We are here today to honour the heroic Palestinian health care workers who gave up their lives for the people of Palestine.

"I think it is unfortunate that this is the reality we are facing today. It is such a basic human response to grant a ceasefire and the fact that that is even a question today shows the character of our government. I think that there needs to be a ceasefire ASAP."

Zara thought the so-called pause "might be a distraction or something to just satisfy the masses while they [the IDF] reload. But there is a lot of support today, and at the previous protests and vigils, and with this, hopefully there will be some sort of stop to this brutality."

The bombing of hospitals was "barbaric," she said, "but even with the truth being shown, it is still not being accepted by certain people."

Her mother commented, "I am surprised, why don't the United Nations do anything? Why does America, which is so powerful, support Israel? This war, it is so frustrating. This war has been going for the last 75 years so it should be stopped now."

Friday's vigil, like other protests by health workers around the country, was organised independently of the

health unions and professional associations, which have either remained silent, or issued mealy-mouthed statements about the need for peace on “both sides.”

The sole statement by the New South Wales Nurses and Midwives Association (NSWNMA) on the issue does not even mention Israel’s bombing of hospitals, let alone include a word of criticism for the genocidal Netanyahu regime, or the Australian Labor governments that supports it. The October 19 statement was only published after the NSWNMA leadership became aware that members had been independently circulating a petition, and after workers at Liverpool Hospital, in southwest Sydney, staged a snap protest.

The Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation (ANMF), the largest union in the country, and the parent organisation of the NSWNMA, has done nothing more than issue a pro forma statement that “support[s] calls for an immediate ceasefire.”

The Victorian branch of the ANMF issued a statement on November 21 that went only marginally further, stating: “We condemn the ongoing attacks on the people of Gaza, their hospitals, nurses, midwives, doctors, healthcare workers and their patients.” But the statement leaves the reader to determine the perpetrator of these attacks, and the union says nothing about the role of Labor, which continues to offer its full support to Israel.

As the WSWs has reported, the Australian Medical Association backed the World Medical Association’s statement that all parties involved in the conflict must “not use health facilities as military quarters or depots, nor to target health personnel facilities and vehicles.” This is an uncritical endorsement of Israeli war propaganda, which claims that hospitals are used as Hamas military command centres.

The Health Services Union, whose 47,000 members across NSW, Queensland and the Australian Capital Territory include paramedics, orderlies and many other health workers, has said nothing whatsoever about Israel’s assault on Gaza.

The tacit endorsement of genocide by Australia’s health unions and professional associations makes clear that these organisations provide no way forward for nurses, midwives, doctors and other medical workers who oppose the mass murder of civilians and destruction of hospitals.

New organisations of struggle must be built, rank-and-

file committees that are democratically controlled by workers themselves and politically and organisationally independent of the unions and Labor.

The Health Workers Rank and File Committee (Australia), a national steering committee for the building of such groups, recently passed a resolution condemning the “genocide being perpetrated against the Palestinian people by the Zionist state of Israel and its imperialist backers. This includes the Albanese Labor government, which has joined with the Liberal-National Coalition to give full backing to Israeli regime...”

“We salute the hospital doctors and other health workers who organised demonstrations in Liverpool hospital in Sydney and in Melbourne in opposition to the bombing of the Al-Ahli Arab Hospital in Gaza City.

“We call on health workers to demand action from their trade unions. We call on workers to discuss the crisis at their workplaces and to organise resolutions, meetings, and demonstrations aimed at bringing this barbarism to an end.”

The Westmead vigils are an important initiative and a step in this direction.



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