

Australia: Union seeks to shut down NSW nurses' demand for 30 percent pay rise

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The New South Wales Nurses and Midwives' Association (NSWNMA) will hold a Special General Meeting (SGM) on Friday, after members issued a written call for the union's 15 percent public sector pay rise claim in this year's industrial award negotiations to be rejected.

The letter, signed by 1,000 NSWNMA members, demanded that the meeting be held "to call on elected officials to adopt a 30 percent pay increase claim for all nurses and midwives in the public sector from 1 July 2024."

The letter further demanded that, at the SGM, "the Association commit to organising its members" to take industrial action, including "closing beds, rolling Stop-Works across LHDs [Local Health Districts], not prioritising ambulance offloads, stopping theatres and withholding registration fees."

The support for the letter is an expression of widespread anger among nurses and midwives over the attacks on their pay and conditions. The Health Workers Rank and File Committee fully supports the demand for a pay increase of at least 30 percent, as well as industrial and political action to fight for the interests of staff.

But we warn that no such struggle can be waged within the framework of the NSWNMA bureaucracy. In order to fight for real improvements to wages in health and the broader public sector, workers will need to take matters into their own hands.

What is posed, moreover, is not only the fight for wage increases but a struggle against the deepest crisis in the public health system in decades.

Underscoring its hostility to anything bearing even a passing resemblance to such a fight, the NSWNMA has responded to the letter with barely concealed contempt. Obligated under the NSWNMA Rules to hold the SGM, the union called the meeting for a Friday evening, and gave members less than one week's notice.

Nurses and midwives will not be allowed to vote on the motion unless they attend in person, at one of only seven locations across the state. Despite the requirement for face-to-face participation, votes will be recorded "via the NSWNMA App," meaning workers cannot discern for themselves the overall sentiment of their colleagues in the room.

Moreover, the NSWNMA leadership has emphasised that

decisions made by members at the meeting will not be binding, and merely be treated as a "recommendation to Council."

In other words, even if workers unanimously vote to reject the NSWNMA's sell-out pay claim and for industrial action aimed at securing a real pay rise, the union bureaucracy reserves the right to ignore members' demands.

NSWNMA general secretary Shaye Candish and assistant general secretary Michael Whaites have featured in a series of social media videos, purporting to answer members' questions about the 2024 award negotiations. The bureaucrats' smug and supercilious "answers" only serve to underscore their disdain for the nurses and midwives they claim to represent.

In a video entitled "Why not a 30% pay claim?" Candish mocks the demand, stating, "I could be cheeky and say 'Why not 100 percent? Why not higher? Why not 150?'" before insisting that "15 percent is a really ambitious claim." This, she says, is based on the "evidence" of what health workers elsewhere in Australia, as well as other public sector workers in NSW, are currently paid.

Even this brief video raises several issues that should be examined closely.

Contrary to Candish's flippant tone, nurses and midwives could quite reasonably ask "Why not 100 percent?" A third-year Registered Nurse in the NSW public sector currently earns a base salary of \$77,397 per annum. This is just 40 percent of the \$192,006 minimum income required to comfortably service a mortgage on an apartment in Sydney, according to Finder data.

The suggestion that the wages and conditions of one group of workers should be held up as a limiting factor on the struggle by another must be rejected out of hand. This position can only lead to a race to the bottom.

Behind it is an attempt to divide workers and distract them from the reality, that Labor governments throughout the country continue to slash the real wages of public sector workers, who already confront the worst cost-of-living crisis in decades.

In another video, Candish responds to the question "Do you have a plan for industrial action?" with derisive laughter, before declaring "Of course I have a plan. I wouldn't be sharing a plan publicly though."

The truth is, Candish and the NSWNMA leadership do indeed have a plan, but it has nothing to do with mobilising nurses and midwives to fight for decent pay and conditions and the reversal of decades of attacks on the public health system.

The plan is the same one employed last year and on many prior occasions—to suppress the opposition of workers and deliver the pro-business NSW Labor government everything it wants.

The NSWNMA has repeatedly declared that the 15 percent claim is “ambitious, but reasonable.” In fact it is neither, and is far less than what is required to merely make up for real wage cuts in previous years, including under the union-enforced pay freeze in 2020. The insistence that it is “ambitious” should serve as a stark warning to workers that the union leadership will accept a far lower offer.

This is precisely what the NSWNMA did last year. After initially advancing a call for a 10 percent pay increase, the union dropped this demand within a month of it being raised, and adopted a “neutral” position on the Labor government’s 4 percent offer. With the union offering workers no way forward, 58 percent begrudgingly accepted the offer, and the real wage cut was rammed through.

This followed the NSWNMA’s betrayal of nurses and midwives in 2022, in which a struggle involving mass statewide strikes was dissolved into a campaign to elect a Labor government, which the union leadership claimed was the only way to defeat the state’s punitive public sector pay cap and institute mandatory minimum nurse-to-patient ratios.

In fact, Labor had publicly declared its opposition to both ratios and the abolition of the wage cap, insisting repeatedly before the election that pay increases would have to be tied to “productivity gains,” in other words, the evisceration of conditions and/or jobs.

The union’s 2024 log of claims declares that safe staffing ratios are “already won.” This is blatantly false. More than a year on from the election, the first “minimum and enforceable shift by shift nurse-to-patient ratios,” have been announced in just two emergency departments across the state.

The NSWNMA bureaucracy’s lies on ratios are directed at covering up its own role in repeatedly shutting down workers’ struggle for safe staffing levels, and that of the Labor government, to which it is closely tied.

Since its election in March 2023, the NSW Labor government has worked with the trade union bureaucracies to implement real wage and funding cuts across the public sector, most recently, slashing the budget of the state’s already resource-starved public schools by \$148 million this year and \$1.4 billion over four years.

Health workers, educators and other public sector workers around the country have all been hit with similar attacks, which governments—all Labor, except in Tasmania—have imposed with the total collaboration of the unions.

This is in line with social spending cuts implemented by the

federal Labor government. The 2023 federal budget included cuts to healthcare of \$11 billion in just two years.

This included the evisceration of all public health measures against the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. The homicidal pro-business “let it rip” policies adopted by all governments, with the complete support of the unions, have provided a stark demonstration of capitalism’s total incompatibility with a functioning public health system.

The letter signed by 1,000 NSW nurses and midwives is a clear indication that there is growing antagonism towards the continuing cuts, and to the joint Labor-union offensive that is imposing them.

Nurses and midwives should vote yes to the call for industrial action and a 30 percent pay rise. But this is only the first step.

Rank-and-file committees, independent of the NSWNMA or any other union, must be built in every hospital and workplace as the means through which workers themselves can plan, prepare and lead a political and industrial struggle against the Labor government’s wage-cutting austerity agenda.

This should involve a turn to colleagues in Victoria, who have just voted overwhelmingly for industrial action against a sub-inflationary pay “rise” offer from the state Labor government, as well as health staff throughout the country, who face identical issues.

Ultimately, what is required is 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.

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