

Australia: Union bureaucracy blocks NSW nurses and midwives' demand for 30 percent pay rise

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A May 3 meeting of nurses and midwives was ended before workers could vote on a motion to reject the union log of claims and take up a campaign of industrial action in support of a 30 percent pay increase demand across the public sector.

Some 1,200 nurses and midwives had signed a letter demanding that the Special General Meeting (SGM) 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,” and that “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 New South Wales Nurses and Midwives' Association (NSWNMA) has advanced a claim for 15 percent in its negotiations with the state Labor government, and the experience of previous years shows the union is likely to agree to a far lower sum.

After around an hour of discussion on the motion, NSWNMA officials declared that the meeting could not continue because attendance had fallen below the required quorum of 250 members. With the motion thus deemed a failure by default, the NSWNMA has proceeded as planned, filing its meagre log of claims this week, despite the clear opposition among workers.

This was the intended result of an anti-democratic process engineered by the union bureaucracy. Compelled under its by-laws to convene the meeting, the union sought to undermine it and limit attendance from the outset.

Nurses and midwives were given less than a week's notice for the Friday night meeting, and while the award covers workers throughout the state, in-person attendance at one of only seven venues was required.

Moreover, the NSWNMA leadership made clear that decisions made by members at the meeting would not be binding, and would merely be a “recommendation to

Council.”

In other words, even if workers had unanimously voted to reject the NSWNMA's sell-out pay claim and for industrial action aimed at securing a real pay rise, the union bureaucracy had made clear that it had no intention of complying with members' demands.

The SGM was not widely advertised on social media. Instead, in the lead-up to the meeting, members were hit with a barrage of social media posts and videos from the union, insisting that a 15 percent claim was “reasonable” and “evidence-based.”

These factors culminated in the attendance at the meeting peaking at just 270 members, out of a total membership of some 75,000 nurses and midwives in NSW, with some 50,000 of these being in the public sector.

Workers who spoke in favour of the motion for a 30 percent pay increase at the meeting, citing the soaring cost of living and decades of real-wage cuts under successive Labor and Liberal-National governments, were branded as causing division by trade union bureaucrats.

NSWNMA general secretary Shaye Candish reprimanded members for exercising their right to call the SGM, stating that, “The call for this meeting has delayed our campaign plan. We should have been serving the claim on the ministry this week... instead, we're here.” Candish also bemoaned the “huge cost,” to hold the meetings, of some \$35,000.

These comments are very revealing. Such is the hostility of the NSWNMA bureaucracy to the interests of the workers it claims to represent, and to basic democratic principles, that it considers a meeting of the membership a waste of time and resources.

As workers in the meeting pointed out, these funds come directly out of the pockets of nurses and midwives themselves, many of whom were excluded from the meeting because they were not allowed to attend online.

Union members pay hundreds of dollars in dues each year—more than \$800 per year for a registered nurse or

midwife. Total membership income for the NSWNMA in 2022 was \$50,065,827.

Despite the statements by Candish that the union's 15 percent pay claim was the result of "the most democratic and representative vote this union has ever seen," only 19,000 workers participated in a vote to endorse the log of claims—substantially less than half of the membership, with 17,000 voting in favour of the claim.

The demands in the log of claims were crafted by the NSWNMA Council, and were put to the membership to vote with no mass meetings or discussion. While the union stated that "research" had been used to set the 15 percent figure, it has not provided this to the membership, and refused again to do so when it was requested at the SGM.

The 15 percent pay claim is entirely inadequate to make up for previous cuts, let alone current inflation. Moreover, the NSWNMA bureaucracy's insistence that the claim is "ambitious" is a 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 10 percent pay increase—after this was demanded by nurses and midwives at a stop-work meeting—the union dropped this demand within a month, and adopted a "neutral" position on the Labor government's 4 percent offer. With the union offering workers no way forward, 58 percent of members begrudgingly accepted the offer, and the cut to real wages was rammed through.

This followed the NSWNMA's betrayal of nurses and midwives in 2022, in which state-wide strikes involving tens of thousands of nurses and midwives were dissolved into a campaign for the election of a Labor government, which the union promoted as a panacea.

In reality, the NSWNMA was fully aware that the state Labor government had insisted that any pay increases would have to be tied to "productivity gains," in other words, the destruction of jobs and conditions.

The union's statement in its 2024 log of claims, that safe staffing ratios are "already won," is blatantly false. More than a year on from the election of the Chris Minns Labor government, the first "minimum and enforceable shift by shift nurse-to-patient ratios," have only been announced for two emergency departments across the state.

This is in line with the austerity agenda of Labor governments at every level. Across the country, public sector workers, including in health and education, have been hit with years of punitive sub-inflationary caps on pay "rises."

The federal May 2023 budget included cuts to healthcare of \$11 billion in just two years, primarily due to the termination of COVID-19 safety measures by the federal Labor government, despite the ongoing pandemic.

The cuts in recent years come on top of decades of privatisation and the evisceration by successive governments of the public health system, along with other vital social infrastructure.

None of this could have been carried out without the total collaboration of the unions, the largest of which is the Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation, the parent organisation of the NSWNMA.

As well as these previous experiences, the outcome of the SGM and the anti-democratic operation that preceded provide further confirmation that nurses and midwives need to take matters into their own hands.

The letter signed by 1,200 NSW nurses and midwives reflects growing opposition among health workers to the deepening attacks on their pay and conditions. But a fight against these attacks cannot be taken forward through appeals to the trade union bureaucracy, which will do whatever it can to suppress such a struggle.

This means nurses and midwives need to build their own organisations in every hospital and health facility. These rank-and-file committees must be politically and organisationally independent of the unions and democratically led by workers themselves.

Through these committees, health workers can prepare, and fight for, demands based on the needs of workers, not what governments, management and union bosses say is "affordable."

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 and other public sector workers throughout the country, who face identical issues.

The fight for improved wages and conditions for nurses and midwives is inseparable from the struggle to reverse decades of government funding cuts, and to establish a first-rate public health system that is freely available to all.

This poses the need for not just an industrial battle, but a political struggle for a socialist alternative to the capitalist system, under which even the most basic needs of the working class, such as health and education, are subordinated to the profit demands of the financial and corporate elite.



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