

Australia: NSW nurses to strike against Labor government's wage cuts

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Public sector nurses and midwives throughout New South Wales (NSW) will strike tomorrow in opposition to a pay offer from the state Labor government that would further slash real wages and do nothing to improve the dire conditions in the health system.

The Labor government, led by Premier Chris Minns, has offered health workers, along with the rest of the public sector, a miserly 9.5 percent nominal pay increase over three years.

Labor's "offer" is in fact a further attack on the real wages of NSW nurses and midwives, in comparison with the official inflation rate of 3.8 percent for the year ending in June. The real situation is even worse, however. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, the cost of living for "employee households" rose by 6.2 percent over the past year.

The NSW Nurses and Midwives' Association (NSWNMA) has called rallies in major cities and towns across the state, following months of letter-writing campaigns and sporadic protests outside individual hospitals. These were designed to isolate workers and wear them down.

The fact that the NSWNMA leadership is now compelled to call strikes and larger rallies reflects the strong opposition among health workers to the Minns government's deepening attack on their wages and conditions. But under the direction of the NSWNMA bureaucracy, the rallies will be about nothing more than allowing nurses and midwives to let off steam, clearing the way for a union-government sellout.

The union is advancing a call for a 15 percent pay increase this year, which even at face value is far short of what is needed to make up for previous cuts, let alone current inflation. But the repeated insistence that this claim is "ambitious" should stand as a warning for workers that the bureaucracy is willing to settle for far less.

The NSWNMA bureaucracy is already working closely with the Labor government to deliver productivity gains and ensure that any meagre pay rise afforded to nurses and midwives does not cost the state an extra cent.

In a video announcing the strike, NSWNMA Secretary Shaye Candish complained that the government had not made an improved pay offer, "despite the fact that we've jumped through every hoop that's been asked of us, including finding the savings needed to pay for the pay rise that we have sought."

Moreover, by focussing the rallies solely on the issue of pay, the NSWNMA is covering over the catastrophic state of the public health system, including chronic understaffing and overwork. This

is the product of decades of funding cuts by Labor and Liberal governments at state and federal level, enforced by the NSWNMA and other health unions.

This crisis has been starkly expressed in recent weeks with the revelation that doctors are having to ration the provision of dialysis treatment in major Sydney hospitals due to the lack of resources.

Tomorrow's rallies mark no change in the campaign's orientation of plaintive appeals to the very Labor government that is carrying out the attack on nurses and midwives' wages and conditions. This is underscored by the fact that one of the rallies will be held outside the premier's office in Kogarah, an otherwise insignificant Sydney suburb.

Every criticism of the Labor government put forward by the NSWNMA leadership is couched in terms designed to confuse workers. The purpose is to cover over what is behind the attack on nurses's wages and conditions and the real role played by the NSWNMA and Labor.

Minns, Treasurer Daniel Mookhey and Health Minister Ryan Park are accused of "betrayal," "gaslighting" and "breaking promises" to nurses ahead of last year's election. The reality is that the NSWNMA bureaucracy is solely responsible for any illusions among workers that the election of a Labor government would resolve their dire pay and conditions.

In 2022, statewide strikes involving tens of thousands of nurses and midwives were dissolved into an electoral campaign for Labor, even though Minns had made clear that any pay increases under a Labor government would have to be tied to "productivity gains," in other words, the destruction of jobs and conditions.

Last year, after briefly calling for a 10 percent pay increase, the union adopted a "neutral" position on the Labor government's 4 percent offer. With the union offering workers no way to take their struggle forward, the offer was narrowly approved.

As nurses' and midwives' anger and frustration has grown this year, the NSWNMA leadership has resorted to even greater lengths to suppress a fight against Labor.

In April, some 1,200 nurses and midwives signed a letter calling on the NSWNMA to fight for a 30 percent pay increase, backed up by a campaign of industrial action, including "closing beds, rolling Stop-Works across LHDs [Local Health Districts], not prioritising ambulance offloads, stopping theatres and withholding registration fees."

The NSWNMA was required to hold a Special General Meeting to discuss the motion, but systematically undermined it, making

clear that even if workers voted in favour, it would not be binding and would merely be conveyed as a “recommendation to Council.”

Another campaign, supported by some 14,000 workers, called for nurses and midwives to delay renewing their professional registration unless the government produced a better pay offer. According to an organiser of this initiative, the NSWNMA leadership refused to “support a grassroots movement like this because it had been generated outside their democratic processes.”

This illustrates that the NSWNMA leadership is hostile to a genuine struggle by nurses and midwives and cannot be reformed, even in the face of broad support from the membership for such a fight.

Nurses and midwives need new organisations of struggle that are politically and organisationally independent of the NSWNMA bureaucracy. Workers need to take matters into their own hands and build rank-and-file committees in hospitals and other health facilities.

Through such committees, nurses and midwives can prepare demands based on their actual needs—not what Labor and the NSWNMA bureaucracy say is “reasonable”—and a plan of action through which to fight for these demands, and for a top-quality public health system.

The Health Workers Rank-and-File Committee proposes the following as a starting point:

- Immediate across-the-board pay increase of 30 percent. Index wages to the current cost of living and introduce automatic monthly cost of living adjustments.
- Mandatory and enforced minimum nurse-to-patient ratios throughout all hospitals as determined democratically by health workers based on what is required.
- Implement public health measures to combat COVID-19, including free, high-quality N95s for all staff and adequate ventilation/air filtration. Reinstate paid pandemic leave so workers have ample time to recover and are not under financial duress to work while possibly infectious.
- Immediate hiring of thousands of health workers to end the current punishing workloads.
- Massively expand spending on public health and education. End the privatisation of essential social services and place all hospitals under public ownership and workers’ control.

This fight requires an understanding of what workers are up against. The slashing of public sector wages by Labor governments at state and federal level is not an isolated process, but part of Labor’s broader austerity agenda. This understanding is precisely what the NSWNMA bureaucracy is determined to obscure.

In recent days, the union has published several graphics on social media meant to back up its divisive claim that what underlies Labor’s wage-slashing offer is a lack of respect for “female-dominated professions.” In these images, nurses’ wages are compared unfavourably to those of electricians, carpenters, train drivers and crane operators, while another claims that nurses have been betrayed by the “men of Macquarie St.”

This is a politically foul exercise in dividing and weakening the working class. While they kowtow before the Labor government

that represents big business, the union officials, themselves privileged bureaucrats, attack and malign whole sections of workers, including the many healthcare workers who happen to be male.

The fact is that all around the country, Labor governments are leading an assault on working-class jobs, wages and conditions.

That is the significance of the federal Labor government’s recent attack on a “male-dominated” section of workers, using unproven media allegations as a pretext to place the Construction, Forestry and Maritime Employees Union under state control as part of a bid to drive down wages and conditions across the building industry.

The very thing required to defeat this, the unified action of the whole working class, is what the NSWNMA is seeking to undermine and prevent through the promotion of reactionary, upper middle-class gender politics.

Rank-and-file committees are the only means through which nurses and midwives can break this isolation and link up with other sections of workers. This includes health workers covered by the Health Services Union, as well as other public sector workers across the state, who all confront the same cuts to real wages.

Above all, what is required is a political struggle against Labor, the unions and all other representatives of the capitalist profit system, which is fundamentally incompatible with the basic social rights of ordinary people, including access to high-quality public healthcare, with decent pay and conditions for workers.

This poses the need for workers to fight for a political alternative, socialism: the reorganisation of society, by the working class, to meet social need, not private profit.

The Health Workers Rank-and-File Committee offers every assistance to nurses and midwives in their fight and in the development of rank-and-file committees.

Contact the Health Workers Rank-and-File Committee today to get involved and discuss these critical questions.

Email: sephw.aus@gmail.com

Twitter: @HealthRandF_Aus

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