

Striking nurses and midwives speak about wages and conditions in NSW hospitals

Our reporters

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On Wednesday, public sector nurses and midwives across New South Wales (NSW) carried out a 24-hour strike in opposition to the state Labor government's real-wage slashing pay offer. For a full report on the strike, [click here](#).

Reporters for the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to striking health workers who took part in rallies in Sydney and Taree about Labor's wage attack and the dire conditions they confront at work.

Erik from Gosford said: "We haven't had a pay rise in ten or so years. We feel duped by the government. We're doing everything we can to help the community but don't have enough staff to do it.

"We're have to do three years of university training to get in, and pay for it ourselves through HECS debts. If the government wants to be fair dinkum about doing the right thing for the community, then they must pay nurses a fair wage, otherwise they'll go and get other jobs.

"The situation is becoming dire. This is not just about us it's about the impact that this has on the whole of community and its overall health.

"I worked through COVID but the situation in the hospital now is worse because we've lost a lot of nurses in the process. Those who had been thinking of early retiring just decided to get out.

"The Minns government, which we were told would be thinking about the workers, has come in and is refusing to give us decent pay. It's hypocritical and dishonest."

A Bankstown Hospital nurse who wanted to remain anonymous said: "I started my career as a nurse ten years ago and worked first at a rural hospital. The pay was not high, but my living costs were much lower, and inflation was nothing like what is now.

"In 2014, I was paying \$500 a fortnight for accommodation, now I'm paying \$875 per week for a mortgage. It's becoming impossible.

"I'm in emergency and always under pressure. The union told us it had an agreement with the Labor government to bring in 1-to-3 ratios after the state election, but it hasn't happened and we've got no idea whether this is going to change.

"Instead of getting more staff, more and more people are leaving because of the low wages."

Yasmin, a registered nurse from Westmead Hospital in Western Sydney, said: "We need someone in government that is going to represent nurses and other health workers. I don't know how we are going to achieve it, but we definitely need this. All we are asking of the Minns government is a 15 percent wage increase, even though this is not enough to make up for what we need and deserve.

"They want to talk about COVID being in the past, but it's still here. We still have a lot of sick people in the hospitals but don't have enough staff to deal with them. We're overworked and we're underpaid. It's very bleak in the hospital at the moment and we're really struggling.

"Nurses are getting sick because they're working ridiculous amounts of overtime to cover staff shortfalls. I do at least one overtime shift per week—you're expected to do that as a minimum."

Linda, who has been a nurse for 12 years, said: "A 15 percent pay rise would be a good start, but we would still be behind the other Australian states.

"Our campaign has been going on for a year. We were told that 15 percent was the maximum the government could afford. We stopped our industrial action while the union and the government had four weeks of intense negotiations, and we came back with nothing.

"I work in the Emergency Department and have done so for the last eight years. We were promised ratios two years ago, but we still don't have them and are not likely to get them.

"I have a mortgage, but with interest rate rises, it's chewing away any free money I would have, so it's a real struggle.

"The health sector has been poorly managed for a long time. The government has money for the military, as you say, but they have their priorities wrong."

An experienced nurse from Wollongong, an industrial city south of Sydney, said: "All through COVID, we worked in horrendous conditions. We were open during the lockdown. We had patients who were kicking, biting, spitting, punching.

"They froze our pay and told us they would reward us afterwards. I don't want promises anymore, I want some

rewards that I can put in the bank to feed my family.

“Wollongong house prices follow those of Sydney. When Sydney house prices go up, those in Wollongong do too. Our rates go up, but we live on poverty wages.”

Her 31-year-old colleague added, “I have four kids. I feel like we are never going to get into the housing market. It’s becoming more and more unreachable. The rent is atrocious, we’re paying \$600 a week and it just keeps going up.

“I don’t know how long I will stay in this profession. I would love to stay somewhere where I can get job satisfaction but if it’s not going to help me raise my family, then I’ll have to find something else.

“The day-to-day workload is exhausting. We need more staff, more funding, more resources.”

Another Wollongong nurse said, “I have only worked two years and I feel like I am done. It’s such an unsustainable job, the hours, the workload. I love the girls I work with, but morale is low.

“We’re in the cardiology unit, we watch our co-workers literally save lives and we’re getting such a low base rate of pay. Sure, you can earn more, but you have to do overtime, putting yourself in danger.

“A double shift for us means you start at 1.30 p.m. and finish at 7.30 in the morning. We are responsible for people’s lives and we are exhausted.”

Andrew, who has 15 years’ nursing experience, said: “We work in the hospital operating theatre. We are so short of people, you end up doing three or four double shifts per week, which is really draining.

“If we’re one or two people down, you have to start cancelling theatre and that affects every other patient that comes in. Patients have had to make arrangements to get to the hospital, have their kids looked after, maybe drive for hours. That puts pressure on the staff to stay back rather than cancel the theatre.

“We’ve had a lot of senior staff leave. The new graduates on average take six to twelve months to get the skills they need to work on their own, which affects the workload of senior staff.

“They just say, ‘I’m over it, I’m done.’ They might be bordering on retirement and if it wasn’t for the stressful working conditions they might stay a few more years.”

A nurse in Taree said: “The Minns government is just ignoring us. They’ve giving us nothing. They promised ratios, they’ve hardly been rolled out and we’re 18 months in. All they’ve offered us is two consecutive days off in a row and an agreement for no night shifts before annual leave. Nothing of monetary value.

“Double shifts are common. The longest shift I’ve known here was 20 hours, in one day. Could you imagine being in resus [resuscitation], you’re 18 hours in and you need to draw up all your life-saving drugs?

“Burnout is huge, it’s just so tiring.

“The question is, what’s the way forward? The government

just refuses to negotiate. We can’t stop, we can’t give up.

“I agree that if we could have united action, rolling action and keep it going that would have an impact. I don’t know what the people in trades hall are doing but that’s what could be coordinated: Rail workers could shut the city down; teachers can shut a school down. We can’t shut the hospital down for days, but if we could get everyone together and work out how to do rolling strikes or rallies, this would have a major impact.”

Melissa, from Wollongong, said: “We have to pick up a lot of overtime because they aren’t enough nurses to do the shifts. Because of the stress of the job, I have dropped down to four days a week. But I am picking up regular extra shifts as well. I do this because you want the ward to be fully staffed. It’s awful when there is a shortfall.

“Even taking today off, I didn’t want to do it. But there is a bigger picture.”

Tara agreed: “I have been doing so much overtime, and everyone is so burnt out. So many people are leaving and going to other states. The pay here is just not worth the job. The senior people are getting so much extra responsibility, for no extra money, so we are left with a lot of junior staff running the wards.”

Neither Melissa nor Tara had confidence that the rally would achieve better pay or conditions. Melissa said: “I hope something happens even though it probably won’t. We have to keep trying. We aren’t going to give up! We do this for the patients. We didn’t become nurses for the money.”

Elisa, from Westmead Children’s Hospital, said: “On a daily basis, we are told there is no one to take over from us [at the end of a shift] and so we have to stay and do forced overtime. We are overworked and underpaid.

“This is a problem all through Australia, it’s not just NSW. Conditions everywhere need to be dealt with.”



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