

New Zealand nurses to hold nationwide strike

Tom Peters
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Tens of thousands of nurses, healthcare assistants, midwives and other workers in public hospitals across New Zealand have voted to hold an eight-hour strike on December 3, to oppose the National Party-led government's pay cuts, and the chronic understaffing and under-resourcing of the healthcare system.

The New Zealand Nurses Organisation (NZNO) said there will be additional part-day strikes from December 9 to December 20, which will be held in different districts on different days.

The actions were announced on November 18, following statements by the government agency Health NZ Te Whatu Ora that nurses would be offered a pay rise of just 0.5 percent for 2025 and 1 percent in 2026.

This provocative and insulting proposal would be a major real wage cut. Annual inflation is currently 2.2 percent and household living costs have gone up 3.8 percent in the 12 months to September, driven by soaring interest rates and insurance premiums, and a 4.8 percent increase in rents.

Healthcare workers are also angered by the government's refusal to implement any measures to ensure safe levels of staffing. In August, *Stuff* reported that there were 2,700 unfilled vacancies for nurses across the country. This month, Health NZ offered jobs to just 844 out of this year's 1,619 graduate nurses, which will push hundreds to look for work overseas.

The government is intensifying its assault on public healthcare. Health NZ reportedly plans to cut 1,478 more roles, in addition to 564 workers already made redundant. The cuts include public health policy advisers, Māori and Pacific health advisers, and IT workers in Health NZ's data and digital services team.

The destruction of what the government calls "back office" jobs will shift more administrative work onto nurses, doctors and other healthcare workers who are already severely overstretched. Health NZ wants cost savings of \$2 billion in 2024/25, which can only be

achieved at the expense of staff and patients.

Mass opposition erupted in September when more than 35,000 people protested in Dunedin against the decision to scale back a vitally important redevelopment of the city's public hospital, which provides services for hundreds of thousands of people in the lower South Island.

Smaller regional centres are also being impacted. On November 16 more than 200 people also protested in Timaru against plans to disestablish several clinical leadership positions at Timaru Hospital, which many workers fear will lead to fewer services at the facility.

Tens of thousands of people, many of them with painful conditions, face interminable wait times for surgery. As of June 30, some 74,850 people had been waiting more than four months for a first specialist assessment, but the level of unmet need is even higher. Radio NZ recently cited a letter from Palmerston North Hospital confirming that it had refused to put patients on the waiting list for orthopedic surgery due to "a lack of sufficient resources to enable us to see all patients referred to us within the limits of the Ministry of Health waiting time targets."

The government's aim is to degrade and shrink the public system and create more opportunities for private companies to profit. According to the *Press*, 37 percent of New Zealanders now have private health insurance, up from 32 percent two years ago, and private hospitals are expanding their capacity. There is already a two-tier system, in which high-quality and timely treatment is only available to those who can afford to pay.

Healthcare workers want to fight against this right-wing agenda. Nurses who are entering into struggle, however, must be warned that the NZNO bureaucracy stands on the side of Health NZ. Union officials have repeatedly worked to isolate and demobilise workers in order to impose sellout agreements.

In 2018, under the then-Labour Party-led

government, about 30,000 nurses and other healthcare workers held a nationwide strike over low pay and the staffing crisis. The NZNO cancelled a second planned strike and presented its members with five separate offers, three of them nearly identical, to wear down their resistance to accepting what was, in real terms, a three-year wage freeze.

The bureaucracy used a similar playbook following a one-day strike in June 2021, which resulted in another agreement that did not address the staffing crisis. In 2023, Labour and NZNO announced a “pay equity” agreement, supposedly to address the historic underpayment of nurses and bring wages into line with similar predominantly male roles. This boosted wages by around 18 to 20 percent, much of which has already been negated by inflation.

At the end of 2021 the NZNO and the rest of the country’s unions enforced the Labour government’s decision to scrap its previous COVID-19 elimination strategy and replace it with the criminal policy of mass infection that had killed millions throughout the world. All measures to stop the spread of COVID were removed, including requirements to wear masks in hospitals, resulting in more than 4,500 deaths so far.

The healthcare system has been significantly weakened at a time when New Zealand is experiencing a whooping cough epidemic and there are growing threats posed by measles, Mpox and potentially bird flu.

Now in opposition, Labour’s health spokesperson Ayesha Verrall hypocritically denounced the National Party government for “taking New Zealanders’ health backwards,” even though Health NZ began slashing spending under the last government. If Labour was still in office, it would be carrying out similar attacks, just as Labour governments are doing in Britain and Australia.

For there to be a real fight against austerity and in defence of public health, workers need new organisations that they themselves control, independent of the pro-capitalist union bureaucracy and Labour. The Socialist Equality Group calls for the building of rank-and-file workplace committees in every hospital, to take the struggle out of the hands of the NZNO and to broaden it to include doctors, aged care workers, laboratory workers and other health staff who have been divided by the unions.

Healthcare workers’ committees would fight to link up with teachers, transport workers and many others who are facing attacks on their jobs, wages and conditions. They would also forge links with workers in Australia, the Pacific and throughout the world, who are all seeking to fight back against the evisceration of healthcare services and all basic social rights.

The fight for free and universal health care must be linked with the political struggle for the socialist reorganisation of society. Workers cannot limit their demands to what the parliamentary parties and union bureaucrats claim is “realistic” or affordable. The tens of billions of dollars that are urgently needed to significantly expand public hospitals and provide high-paying jobs for all staff, must be found by reallocating the money hoarded by the financial elite, and by stopping the vast diversion of resources to militarism in preparation for imperialist war.



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