

Australia: NSW private hospital nurses strike for higher wages and safe working conditions

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Nurses and midwives employed by Ramsay Health Care, Australia's largest private hospital operator, walked out for 24 hours across New South Wales on Tuesday to demand a 20 percent pay rise over three years and mandatory minimum nurse-to-patient ratios across all sectors. The last pay rise for the company's nurses and midwives was a 1.5 percent increase in July 2022, when the official inflation rate was 6.1 percent.

About 500 strikers, including contingents from many of the company's 17 hospitals in NSW, assembled at Hyde Park and marched to Ramsay's annual general meeting at the Sheraton Hotel in central Sydney. It was the first ever 24-hour statewide walkout by NSW Nurses and Midwives' Association (NSWNMA) members at Ramsay hospitals.

Ramsay's 5,000 members are also demanding higher penalty rates, better parental and personal leave entitlements and other improvements in working conditions. Private hospital nurses and midwives in NSW are paid lower wages and receive less annual, maternity and personal leave than their counterparts in the state's public hospitals.

The NSWNMA began negotiations with the company in April 2023 and since then has held 18 "bargaining meetings," dragging out negotiations and organising low-level actions designed to wear down their members and push them into accepting a cost-cutting union deal that maintains company profits. Ramsay Health Care, which has over 400 hospitals internationally, including 71 in Australia, made almost \$900 million profit last year, after selling off its Asian hospitals.

The latest pay offer from the company was just 11 percent over three years, with no concrete proposals on nurse-to-patient ratios. This has been overwhelmingly rejected by NSWNMA members.

On Tuesday, striking Ramsay nurses and midwives, like their counterparts at Healthscope private hospitals and more than 65,000 public hospital nurses in NSW currently involved in protracted industrial disputes, made clear their determination to fight.

Nurses and midwives carried placards denouncing the

company for failing to lift their wages in the face of record increases in the cost of living and pointing to the unsafe conditions caused by inadequate staffing. Read the comments of the striking workers here.

NSWNMA officials addressed Tuesday's rally denouncing the company for its "corporate greed," interspersed with constant chants of "Shame Ramsay, Shame," and the blowing of whistles distributed by the union. All of this was aimed at covering up the union's political record in imposing previous cost-cutting enterprise agreements and preventing any serious discussion by nurses and midwives about how to take forward their struggle.

"Ramsay cannot continue to put profits before staff and patients any longer," NSWNMA general secretary Shaye Candish declared. Ramsay shareholders, she shouted, must "stand up" for nurses and midwives against "corporate greed."

Candish's posturing is a disingenuous attempt to promote the dangerous illusion that the multimillion-dollar corporation can be pressured into modifying its profit-driven business model. This is tantamount to asking a leopard to change its spots!

David Thodey, the chair of Ramsay's board, said in reply to questions from nurses at the AGM about their pay claims, "Our goal is to find a balanced outcome which supports our people and is sustainable for the business."

Translated into plain English, more talks and collaboration with the union are needed to cook up an enterprise deal that "sustains" the corporate giant's profits, in line with stock market demands.

While Candish and other union officials called on Ramsay nurses and midwives to "stay strong" and "united," their modus operandi is the exact opposite—to keep Ramsay workers isolated and wear down their fighting spirit.

Not a single union speaker mentioned the 65,000 NSW public-sector nurses and midwives currently in a struggle with the Minns Labor government over wages and conditions, or the approximately 4,000 Healthscope private hospital nurses and midwives fighting the company's cost-

cutting wage offer and attacks on their working conditions.

On November 13, just two weeks earlier, 10,000 public hospital NSWNMA members walked off the job and marched to the state parliament. They demanded the Minns Labor government grant an immediate 15 percent pay rise, higher staffing levels and improved conditions.

Last week hundreds of NSWNMA members at Healthscope, Australia's second-largest private hospital provider, walked out for two hours in west and south-west Sydney to demand higher pay and improved ratios. This followed a two-hour strike on November 5 by 300 NSWNMA members at Healthscope's Northern Beaches Hospital in Sydney.

The NSWNMA leadership is intensely hostile to any unification of these struggles and is doing everything it can to keep workers isolated according to their employer, or even to individual hospitals.

Moreover, the NSWNMA is desperate to keep nurses and midwives cut off from other sections of health workers or the broader working class. This has been starkly demonstrated in the public-sector dispute, where the union leadership has insisted that nurses and midwives are being discriminated against by employers and the Labor government solely because their industry workforce is predominantly female. This is a political diversion.

The poor pay and exploitative working conditions, along with the seriously low and unsafe staffing levels, are not "gender issues" but part of an escalating government and employer assault on wages, staffing levels and hard-won working conditions against every section of the working class. The cost-cutting wage dictates of federal and state Labor governments and private employers, all with the active assistance of the unions, are class attacks. They are brutally applied across the board, irrespective of workers' gender.

NSW public and private hospital nurses, who are all facing the same onslaught on their wages and working conditions, are covered by a multitude of separate enterprise agreements and awards under Australia's repressive industrial relations laws. While the NSWNMA may say that this prevents them from organising unified statewide action of nurses and midwives, these laws were developed and imposed with the active and unanimous support of Australia's trade unions. Their purpose was and is to stop unified action, drive up productivity and boost profits.

Nurses and midwives cannot take forward their fight for decent wages and safe nurse-to-patient ratio across all parts of the health sector under the domination of the union bureaucracies, which reject any struggle against Australia's repressive industrial relations laws.

The first step for nurses and midwives is to recognise that

they are engaged in a political struggle, not just against the private sector health corporations, which are being supported and rapidly expanded by state and federal Labor governments across the country, but the union officialdom that enforces their dictates.

What is required is the formation of rank-and-file committees of nurses and midwives in hospitals and all other medical facilities to democratically discuss and decide on demands based on their actual needs. These should include an immediate 30 percent wage rise, safe staffing levels and humane working hours and conditions in all health facilities.

These committees, which must be fully independent of the trade union bureaucracy, are the only means through which nurses and midwives can reach out to all other health workers, as well as broader layers, to discuss the development of unified action.

In opposition to the government provision of billions of dollars for military spending, tax cuts and other concessions to the rich, health workers must fight for a socialist program with a vast expansion of funds for public health and the provision of free, high-quality medical treatment for all.

The privatisation of health and other essential services must not only be stopped, but reversed. All existing private hospitals must be placed under public ownership and democratic workers' control.

We urge nurses, midwives and all health workers who agree with this basic analysis to form a rank-and-file committee in your hospital, circulate copies of this article among your fellow workers and contact the Health Workers Rank-and-File Committee to discuss how to expand and take forward your struggle.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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