

Australia: Public hospital doctors to strike, defying NSW government threats

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An estimated 5,000 doctors from 32 public hospitals across New South Wales (NSW) are set to begin a three-day strike on Tuesday over low wages, understaffing and unsafe working conditions in public hospitals.

Although emergency departments and critical care units will remain unaffected, the strike, which is to proceed in defiance of an Industrial Relations Commission (IRC) order and possible fines, will affect all other services.

The unprecedented action—the first statewide strike of doctors in Australia’s most populous state since 1998—expresses the rising anger about the catastrophic situation in public hospitals.

The Australian Salaried Medical Officers Federation (ASMOF) has been compelled to call the stoppage amid frustration among doctors over a year of fruitless backroom discussions between the union and the NSW state Labor government of Premier Chris Minns.

The government has refused to budge from its official public sector pay rise cap of 3 percent per year over three years, an amount that barely keeps up with the rising cost of living, let alone compensate for previous below-inflation increases.

Public sector psychiatrists and nurses and midwives are also currently involved in long-running conflicts with the state government over its 3 percent rise cap and are respectively demanding 25 percent and 15 percent wage rises.

ASMOF has called for parity between NSW doctors and their counterparts elsewhere in the country. They have suggested this would require a 30 percent pay increase, but have remained vague over the time period of such an increase.

The union has also raised the need for safe working hours, better rostering, fair compensation for unsociable hours, job security and other demands to stop the escalating cases of burnout amongst doctors and other medical staff.

The unsustainable situation facing doctors and other health workers in NSW, conditions which are mirrored in other Australian states, is the result of years of inadequate funding and privatisation of profitable sections of the industry by consecutive Labor and Liberal governments, state and federal alike. These processes have been exacerbated by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and the decision of federal and state governments to scrap all safety measures and let the virus rip in the interest of corporate profits.

Every public health facility lacks adequate staffing and resources as they attempt to deal with rising demand.

Emergency department attendances across Australia were up nearly 16,000 in the September 2024 quarter compared to the same period last year, according to Bureau of Health Information data.

Determined to stop any section of the public sector workforce breaking its pay caps, the Minns government has accused the doctors of jeopardising patients’ lives while falsely claiming that it cannot afford to grant the doctors’ demands.

ASMOF public hospital doctors are defying an IRC directive last Wednesday which banned the strike and ordered the union not to engage in any industrial action over the next three months. Unions violating IRC dispute orders can be fined \$10,000 for the initial day of contravention and an additional \$5,000 for each subsequent day the action continues.

When ASMOF’s state committee later informed the IRC that the planned strike would go ahead, the IRC postponed a scheduled arbitration hearing into public sector psychiatrists pay demands. The psychiatrists, who are also ASMOF members, began submitting their resignations on January 21 in protest over the government’s refusal to grant their pay claims. The commission has now threatened to end all future hearings of that dispute.

On Friday, the state government’s health ministry sent bullying letters to doctors in several health districts warning them that they could face disciplinary action from the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (AHPRA) and the NSW Health Care Complaints Commission (HCCC).

According to media reports, the letters declared that the doctors had “no right” to strike because the IRC had ordered ASMOF to cease all industrial action, claiming the walkout could compromise patient safety.

Doctors were also warned that NSW health agencies could lodge official complaints against doctors in AHPRA and the HCCC over their “conduct” in any industrial action. AHPRA, which accepts anonymous complaints against medical practitioners, has the power to deregister and destroy the careers of health workers.

While the Minns government has made it crystal clear that it will not grant the doctors’ demands, the union continues to call

on it to resume negotiations while promoting illusions that the government can be pressured into making concessions that would resolve the escalating public health care crisis.

ASMOF, like the NSW Nurses and Midwives Association and the Health Services Union have kept doctors separate from nurses and other health workers, including psychiatrist members of ASMOF, who are all involved in the same fight over wages, conditions and inadequate staffing levels.

On Thursday, ASMOF NSW executive director Andrew Holland submitted an affidavit to the IRC, pledging to contact psychiatrists and direct them to not participate in the strike. This desperate appeal was an attempt to keep the psychiatrist pay dispute locked into the IRC.

From the outset, the ASMOF leadership opposed psychiatrists taking any strike action, promoting false claims that protest resignations would shame the government into granting their demands. This perspective is bankrupt and impossible. That the Minns government has raised the possibility of using AHPRA's repressive disciplinary action against striking doctors is an indication that it is planning further attacks on health workers.

The doctors' strike action and resolution of the escalating crisis of public health will not be won by appealing to the Minns Labor government but through unified political and industrial action of doctors, nurses and other health workers on a program that sees public health take priority against the deepening attack on wages and conditions and the public health system itself.

This is impossible while the strike remains in the hands of the ASMOF which, like the rest of the union bureaucracy, is tied to the Labor Party and the political establishment and that have enforced every cut to the wages and conditions of health workers and the public health system of the past four decades.

These are not simply state issues. ASMOF and the other health unions, many of which explicitly endorsed Minns' election two years ago, present the issue solely as one of the NSW government. In reality, the assault on public healthcare has been spearheaded by the federal Labor government of Prime Minister Anthony Albanese through real funding reductions and the implementation of "let it rip" COVID policies.

Amid a federal election, the health unions are covering this up while limiting disputes to isolated local and state-based struggles. In reality, workers are in a political fight against the federal and state Labor governments, the political and media establishment, the industrial courts and the capitalist system itself.

To take forward such a struggle requires the broadest unified mobilisation of health workers throughout NSW and across the country. That is impossible under the domination of the union apparatuses, which are doing everything they can to isolate each section of workers.

What is required are independent rank-and-file committees controlled by health workers themselves, not the Labor-aligned trade union bureaucrats. Through such committees, workers can share information across occupations and facilities; they can develop the widest democratic discussion on the issues that they confront and what is needed, and they can prepare genuine, not token, industrial and political action to fight for those demands.

Above all, the assault on public health points to the need for an alternative perspective which challenges the whole social and economic set-up. What has been revealed is that basic needs, including decent public healthcare, are incompatible with a society dominated by the profit interests of corporations and billionaires.

The alternative is the fight for a workers' government that would implement socialist policies, including placing the banks and big business under public ownership and democratic workers' control, to transfer the wealth that is squandered on profits and war into healthcare, education and other vital social necessities.

We urge striking doctors to contact the Health Workers Rank and File Committee to discuss working conditions and experiences at your hospital or medical facility and how to establish a rank-and-file committee to take forward your struggle.

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