

Australia: NSW public hospital doctors hold mass protests during statewide walkout

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More than 5,000 doctors in New South Wales (NSW) began a three-day strike on Tuesday in opposition to a miserly wage offer from the state Labor government of Premier Chris Minns. The doctors have demanded a 30 percent pay rise and an end to serious understaffing, punishing working hours and unsafe conditions in the public hospitals.

Thousands of doctors have participated in protests outside most major hospitals in Sydney and in regional areas, including the John Hunter Hospital in Newcastle and hospitals in Port Macquarie, Coffs Harbour, Dubbo, Lismore and Orange. *World Socialist Web Site* reporters attended several of the rallies, speaking with striking doctors and other health workers about their struggle for improved wages and conditions.

The largest demonstration was in front of the NSW Ministry of Health in North Sydney on Tuesday involving around 800 doctors. They carried handmade placards saying, “Sleep is not a luxury: Pay obstetricians for overnight callback,” “Burnt out walking out,” “NSW is haemorrhaging doctors,” “The system is sick” and chanted slogans denouncing the state Labor government.

The strike, despite immediately targeting the NSW Labor government, is of national significance. It is being held amid a federal election campaign, in which Labor, the Liberal-National Coalition and the corporate media are desperately trying to suppress any expression of the immense anger in the working class over the cost-of-living crisis, real wage reductions and the decimation of social services, including health and education.

The struggle by doctors, who were once considered a privileged layer, points to the breadth of the social crisis. It is an indictment of the miserable election promises of Labor and the Coalition, each of which are pledging cost-of-living relief equating to a few dollars a week for most workers, and no substantial funding increases to public healthcare, which is in its deepest crisis in decades.

The response of the state Labor government also has national implications. Despite NSW doctors being the lowest paid in the country, Minns has rejected calls for a pay increase greater than 10.5 percent over three years, scarcely higher than the rate of inflation. That signifies the determination of Labor governments to enforce deep-going austerity to force workers to pay for the budget deficits. What is being inflicted in NSW will be the policy of the next federal government, whichever party takes office.

Just as the federal Labor government has carried out major attacks on workers’ democratic rights, including placing the construction union under direct state control, so too did the Minns administration seek to illegalise the doctors’ strike. It successfully petitioned for the pro-business Industrial Relations Commission to ban industrial action, but the doctors have defied that draconian edict.

Minns’ health ministry doubled down, sending a letter to doctors threatening to refer them to the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (AHPRA) and the Health Complaints Commission, if they participated in the action. Given the scope of both bodies’ powers, including medical deregistration, that is a blatant threat of victimisations. The government is also engaged in strike-breaking, with attempts to force junior doctors to carry out the tasks of their protesting colleagues.

The Minns government is carrying out these anti-democratic measures, on the basis of cynical and lying claims that the strike is jeopardising patient safety. In reality, the doctors have ensured the continued operation of emergency departments and other critical theatres. It is the Labor government, moreover, that jeopardises patient safety on a daily basis, through chronic underfunding which has led to massive hospital wait times, bed shortages and overworked staff.

The stoppage is notable as one of the few strikes

occurring nationally during the federal election campaign. In election season, the union bureaucracies take their role as an industrial police force to new levels, suppressing virtually all stoppages lest they interfere with the campaigning of the parties of business, such as Labor.

The doctors' strike has not proceeded because of any great determination on the part of the officials from the Australian Salaried Medical Officers' Federation (ASMOF). Instead, it has taken place because the union bureaucrats know they are sitting on a potential powder keg of anger among doctors, on the one hand, and because of the intransigence of the Minns government on the other.

ASMOF, without a shred of a democratic mandate, sought to cancel the strike on Monday, the night before it was due to begin. They requested only a 10 percent interim pay rise, in exchange for collaborating with the government against the doctors' stoppage.

The offer was rejected by the government, but ASMOF is clearly determined to enforce a sellout. It has largely limited the dispute to the issue of national pay parity, and has noted that NSW doctors are on average paid 30 percent less than their counterparts in other states. But the request for an interim offer, and follow-up comments by ASMOF officials, made clear they never had the slightest intention of fighting for a 30 percent rise, despite hinting at that being their demand.

ASMOF Executive Director Andrew Holland told the media that doctors did not expect a 30 percent pay rise in one year, but just wanted a "reasonable starting point" for talks. "We are willing to compromise," Holland said. In other words, ASMOF wants a marginal increase to the pay cap, to shut down the dispute.

At the same time, the union is isolating doctors from other sections of health workers facing identical issues. Earlier this year, ASMOF orchestrated the mass resignation of public hospital psychiatrists, whom it also represents. ASMOF had peddled the lie that the threat of such resignations would result in an improved pay offer from the Minns government.

When it did not, the psychiatrists were left by ASMOF to their own devices, either to quit as individuals or to remain without a substantial wage rise. With its stunt having resulted in a fiasco, ASMOF is now promoting a pay case in the pro-business IRC as a panacea.

Other unions in the sector have played the same role, with the New South Wales Nurses and Midwives Association and the Health Services Union repeatedly enforcing deals that slash real wages and do nothing to

resolve the dire conditions in the sector. Above all, the unions are hostile to a unified movement of health workers in a political struggle against the government.

That hostility has been on display at the strike rallies, where ASMOF officials have confined discussion to sloganeering and chants appealing to the Minns government.

At the protest outside the Ministry of Health on Tuesday, an ASMOF official refused a request from Socialist Equality Party NSW Senate candidate Max Boddy to address the demonstration. A Greens candidate, however, was permitted to speak at a protest outside Westmead Hospital on the same day.

ASMOF knew that the representative from the Greens, a party of the capitalist establishment oriented to forming coalition governments with Labor, would limit their remarks to calls for Minns to "do the right thing," and vague professions of solidarity.

Boddy and the SEP, by contrast, would have warned about the sellout being prepared by the union, while explaining to doctors that their struggle could only go forward through unified action with nurses, general health staff, psychiatrists and all other health workers, not only in NSW but nationally.

He would have raised the necessity for doctors to take matters into their own hands, by forming rank-and-file committees independent of ASMOF, to actualise such unified action and to develop a democratic discussion among doctors on what is required for them to perform their critical roles in a decent, fully funded public healthcare system.

And that, the SEP candidate would have explained, inevitably poses the necessity for a political struggle against the Labor governments, state and federal, and their subordination of health, education and other vital social services to the dictates of the corporations and big business. It raises the need for a socialist perspective, aimed at reorganising society to meet social need, not private profit.

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