NSW public hospital doctors speak out over unsafe and worsening conditions

Our reporters
10 April 2025

Thousands of public hospital doctors walked out on strike this week in New South Wales to demand a 30 percent pay rise, an end to chronic staff shortages, unsafe hours, fatigue and burnout.

Hundreds of doctors from across different specialties and levels of seniority participated in rallies and demonstrations across the state, winning widespread public support.

The following is an edited selection of interviews recorded by *World Socialist Web Site* reporters with striking doctors, as well as nurses and other health workers who joined the rallies.

Most of the interviews are anonymous because, late last week, doctors were sent bullying letters from the NSW Ministry of Health warning them that they could be reported to medical regulatory bodies for striking. The walkout was also in defiance of an Industrial Relations Commission strike ban.

About 250 doctors and supporters rallied outside John Hunter Hospital in Newcastle.

A junior doctor from palliative care said he had not planned to strike but, after receiving an email from the health department saying strikers could be reported to AHPRA, decided to walk out: "That was pretty offensive, and it radicalised me.

"My workload involves lots of unstable shift work. There is not really a regular routine when you're junior. You think you're doing one shift, then you're immediately put onto nights and expected to adapt to that. Then they want you to come to work within the next day with very little time to recover. I've done 12 hours a day, 7 days a week, which is full on."

Referring to government claims that the doctors' walkout was unsafe for patients, he said: "If this is unsafe then what's the typical day like? We're showing the government just how stretched thin we are and that we're willing to stretch ourselves even thinner to make things better for public health, because at the end of the day our interests are to the patients. Striking is the only way we show the message we need to show."

Asked about the worsening public health crisis, he added: "It's a lack of funding and a lack of priorities. There's no way to pretend like there isn't enough money. Everyone seems to have money for a war, but not health."

David, a critical care unit doctor at John Hunter Hospital, said, "One of the big reasons I'm here is because I'm angry with the NSW government and the middle and upper bureaucracy of each individual hospital and the department of health, for consistently undervaluing and disrespecting us and undermining the work that we do in the hospitals.

"We've been called clinical marshmallows by the managers at John Hunter and gaslighted by Chris Minns and the Labor government who say that we're causing patient harm by striking.

"Our junior doctors are so overworked, with an enormous burden of responsibility on them. Particularly during after-hours and weekend shifts, where they're left to look after an enormous number of patients on their own, with sometimes very minimal support from more experienced doctors.

"They work a lot of overtime hours, and depending on what district you work in, it can be extremely difficult to claim your overtime and get paid for the work you're doing.

"A normal day shift for a medical or surgical team is rostered as eight-and-a half-hours, but it's very rare for a junior doctor to finish after that time. They'll stay on [for hours] to make sure they get all their jobs done and patients have what they need. Often those overtime claims are denied and not paid out.

"I think understaffing is a big problem regardless of what state you're from and regardless of what part of healthcare you're working in. At my hospital, the nursing and allied health staff are chronically, massively understaffed."

"Successive governments just refuse to budge, regardless of whether it's a Liberal or Labor government. I think a coordinated strike involving all health workers would be an amazing thing and could have a major impact," David said.

The largest demonstration of doctors this week was on Tuesday morning outside the Ministry of Health in St Leonards. About 800 attended, with doctors coming from the nearby Royal North Shore Hospital and other parts of Sydney.

A young doctor from Westmead Hospital said the health system had been crumbling for decades and that NSW's low salaries for public hospital doctors were just one indicator of the crisis.

"We're living in one of the most expensive cities in Australia, and yet they refuse to discuss a genuine increase in our salaries. I was an intern at one of the Western Sydney hospitals. Like hospitals everywhere, we didn't have enough staff and were doing more and more overtime to fill gaps and other deficiencies in the system.

"Doctors, nurses and other health professionals need to have decent rest to give their patients the best possible attention and treatment. This is not possible when working impossibly long shifts, day after day, week after week, month after month."

His friend, also from Westmead said, "We're currently in a race to the bottom with constant pushbacks by the government. In the

© World Socialist Web Site

last few days, we've seen more and more vitriol from the Minns government and witnessed the utter contempt it has for the work we do… The government thinks it can threaten us with AHPRA, but we are humans and being able to strike is part of our human rights."

Another young doctor explained that where she worked some doctors had to deal with up to 250 patients, over six or seven wards, on night shifts and with no dinner breaks.

"We are fed up with this government, the way they are treating us, and how they take advantage of us. Doctors rarely talk about going on strike, let alone actually do it," she said.

"When you see the size of this protest and the fact that we're going out on strike for three days, then the government needs to understand that we're serious and yes, there definitely needs to be united action by all health workers over this situation."

Jane (not her real name), a doctor from Blacktown Hospital, joined a protest of about 300 doctors and supporters outside Westmead Hospital.

"Our hours are very long because we are understaffed. We hardly get any sick leave. In fact, I had none in my first three months here, yet we are working at a hospital where often everyone gets sick," she said.

"In my section, two of us cover 28 patients, which means we're not providing the best care for the patients.

"I've seen articles saying that doctors on average make $220,000. I don't know what doctors they are talking about! With all the studying, all the hours and the people's lives that depend on what I do, the extra pay shouldn't be an issue. But it's not really about the money. If we had better conditions, then fine, but we are losing both.

"We have forced overtime. If I leave, saying I am done for the day, the team has extra work. I would never not be there for the others. It's out of the question to say no to overtime because you would be dumping your work on someone else… and we barely get breaks. I can count on one hand since I started how many times that we've had a 15-minute break."

Asked about unified action by all health and other public sector workers, Jane said: "I agree. If we all strike together, it would have a greater impact. I'm not too sure why that doesn't happen, but I think we'd get better answers to our questions."

Jane said the email threatening legal action was a "scare tactic" and would have the biggest impact "on international doctors because they have to think about their visas."

Terri (not her real name) is an administrator at Westmead Hospital. She decided to join the rally outside the hospital, saying, "I'm giving the doctors my 110 percent support. They work under atrocious conditions with long hours, high ratios of patients to doctors and the stress of not being supported by the higher-ups in the hospital. And for the junior doctors, there is added responsibility without proper teaching from more senior doctors because they are not available.

"The pay and conditions are just not good enough. We put our lives in their hands and that responsibility is massive. They need a pay rise and need to be recognised for the work they do.

"We need a unified fight. We are all one. Look at the psychiatrists—we all know how bad mental health is in NSW. Sometimes there is a six-month wait to see a psychiatrist, which can be too late for some. The nurses, doctors and psychiatrists all should be acting together."

Responding to the $368 billion made available for nuclear submarines, Jane said, "I have no words for that. It's disgusting. Look at the people here. They are here because they believe in what they do. And they put in the hours because they believe in what they do. I hope they are successful. I hope that workers do unify and beat the government."

Isabella, an enrolled nurse who has worked at Nepean Hospital in Sydney's west for just over 12 months, joined the doctors' protest outside that hospital.

"I'm here to back up the doctors who work so hard for very little money. They're working three, four, five hours past their finishing times most days just to get the work done and it's not right," she said.

"We're all getting burnt out—doctors and nurses, and allied health—and we're not getting paid [properly] and not getting the time off, especially those of us that are trying to do further studies and work at the same time. We're trying to further the public health system and we're getting penalised for it."

Asked her opinion about unified action by all public sector health workers, Isabella said: "Why not back each other up? There's strength in numbers. The nursing union is starting to slowly back down, but if we teamed up with all the doctors, nurses, allied health and midwives, imagine how much more of an impact we'd make. Why wouldn't we try to create a bigger impact that will get them to listen to us? The government is not listening to us any other way.

"We need something that unites all of us, because we're all going through the same struggles. The unions don't seem to see that there's a common denominator here, and that's the lack of resources in public health and even the private system. We're all facing the same struggles, and the government doesn't want to hear it," she said.

Authorised by Cheryl Crisp for the Socialist Equality Party, Level 1/457-459 Elizabeth Street, Surry Hills, NSW, 2010, Australia.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site