

More than 5,000 doctors strike in New Zealand

Tom Peters
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About 5,500 doctors held a 24-hour nationwide strike in New Zealand on May 1 in protest against a pay offer of just 1.5 percent, spread over two years. This would be a major pay cut in real terms, with annual inflation at 2.6 percent for the year to March.

It was the first ever full-day strike by senior doctors in the country's public hospitals, called by the Association of Salaried Medical Specialists (ASMS). It follows strikes last year by thousands of junior doctors and by tens of thousands of nurses, and repeated strikes this year by medical laboratory workers.

The doctors' strike coincided with strikes by 370 perioperative nurses at Auckland City Hospital, in protest over understaffing, and by nearly 1,000 home support workers employed by Access Community Health, who have received no pay increase for nearly two years. The unions involved—the New Zealand Nurses Organisation (NZNO) and the Public Service Association (PSA)—limited these strikes to just two hours.

These actions reflect widespread opposition to the right-wing National Party-led coalition government's intensifying assault on the public health system.

The day before the doctors' strike, Health NZ confirmed that it has axed 540 jobs from its IT department, reducing its staffing by about a third. This will place further pressure on public hospitals' antiquated computer systems.

Hospitals are being instructed to find hundreds of millions of dollars in cost savings and are leaving vacant positions unfilled. According to the ASMS, the vacancy rate for senior medical officers across the country is 12 percent, but in some areas it is more than 40 percent.

Health Minister Simeon Brown said he was "disappointed" with the strike. He cynically told the

media that "an estimated 4,300 procedures such as hip operations, knee operations, cataract removals and critical specialist assessments would be delayed as a result of this strike."

In fact, the austerity measures imposed by his government—and the previous Labour Party-led government—have produced the crisis of unmet need. According to *Newsroom*, "The waitlist for elective procedures sat at 76,677 at the end of September, with 30,173 waiting for more than four months and 2,159 waiting for more than a year."

One News reported that 200,000 people are currently waiting to receive a specialist assessment, with long wait times often leading to serious harm. Doctor Allan Moffitt told the outlet: "I have a patient who had cancer and I could tell that it was a serious type of cancer. Her referral took over six months to be seen."

Emergency departments are frequently filled above capacity, resulting in significant delays for urgent cases. *Newsroom* reports that data for 2024 shows ambulances "waited 35 minutes, on average, to hand patients over to hospitals."

One doctor wrote in the r/newzealand Reddit forum that, for them, the strike was "about retaining colleagues so that work isn't utter misery. We are haemorrhaging specialists at our hospital, and with each resignation, there's more strain on those who stay."

Striking Wellington physician Andrew Davies told Radio NZ the staffing crisis was the major issue: "We've got vacant jobs that we're not allowed to advertise. It's lies that they're not getting rid of front-line staff."

In response to the crisis, the government is outsourcing thousands of procedures to private hospitals, further undermining the public system and

paving the way for privatisation.

More budget cuts are being prepared. Finance Minister Nicola Willis revealed on April 29 that in response to the deteriorating economic outlook—the US trade war targeting China could trigger a global recession—the government will slash new spending in this year's budget from the previously announced \$NZ2.4 billion to just \$1.3 billion.

This will be the smallest spending increase in a decade. Treasury officials previously stated that \$2.5 billion in new spending was the minimum required just to meet the growing cost of delivering services.

The opposition Labour Party's criticism of the government's cuts is thoroughly hypocritical. The previous Labour-led government oversaw a worsening crisis in the health system, including expanding waiting times for surgery and an effective wage freeze, which prompted strikes by nurses, midwives, doctors and other workers. Labour's decision in 2022 to remove all restrictions on the spread of COVID-19 led to thousands of deaths and tens of thousands of hospitalisations, placing extraordinary pressure on hospitals.

Labour supports the government's plan to double military spending from 1 to 2 percent of gross domestic product, which will be funded at the expense of health, education and other essential programs. The government has pledged an extra \$12 billion for defence over four years to further integrate New Zealand into US-led imperialist war plans.

Workers also confront a trade union bureaucracy that is enforcing government cuts and preventing an effective, unified struggle against austerity. The various health unions have ensured that different sections of workers remain isolated from each other, with strikes limited to a day or less.

It has been more than five months since more than 30,000 nurses struck after rejecting a 1.5 percent pay offer, with the dispute still unresolved. The NZNO is seeking to wear down its members and persuade them to accept a sellout.

The PSA is demanding that even more money be spent on the military, while the union collaborates in imposing redundancies across multiple government departments.

The ASMS returned to negotiations with Health NZ the day after the doctors' strike. The government

agency has requested facilitated bargaining by the Employment Relations Authority.

The union's Sarah Dalton signalled that the union leadership is backing away from its claim for a 12 percent pay increase. She told the *New Zealand Herald*: "It may not be that we achieve 12 percent, but if we can't achieve better than what is on offer at the moment, we will not be able to settle this."

The Socialist Equality Group warns that a sellout is being prepared. Doctors, nurses and other healthcare workers can only fight back against the government's cuts and privatisation plans if they take matters out of the hands of the union bureaucracy. Rank-and-file committees, controlled by workers themselves, should be established in every hospital to coordinate their struggle.

The crisis in the health system also raises the need for a socialist political perspective. Workers must reject the fraud that well-funded, properly staffed and freely available public healthcare is "unaffordable" and that they have to be "realistic" and accept pay cuts.

The billions of dollars hoarded by the super-rich should be used to vastly expand the public health system and put an end to poverty and inequality. Workers must also demand an end to military spending, with the money redirected into health and other vital social programs.



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