

# New Zealand nurses strike against wage cuts, staffing crisis

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An estimated 36,000 nurses, healthcare assistants and midwives in New Zealand's public hospitals struck for 24 hours on July 30 to protest below-inflation pay offers from the government and a severe staffing crisis.

Rallies and pickets were organised at 33 locations across the country. In Wellington healthcare workers marched to the headquarters of the government agency Health NZ Te Whatu Ora and to parliament.

It was only the second one-day nationwide strike called by the New Zealand Nurses Organisation (NZNO) since last November, when union members voted for action after the government agency Health NZ offered an insulting pay rise of less than 1 percent a year for 2025 and 2026.

Following limited strike action in December last year, the NZNO went back into negotiations with Health NZ, which have dragged on behind closed doors for the past eight months.

Health NZ is now offering just 3 percent spread across 27 months, i.e. less than 1.5 percent a year. This is well below the 2.7 percent annual inflation rate and the 4.6 percent increase in food prices.

The National Party-led government is defending this effective wage cut. Prime Minister Christopher Luxon told parliament: "there has been a big effort around nurse remuneration over a number of years... we have average nurse salary and incomes at \$125,000."

This is utterly false. The top salary for a senior registered nurse with several years' experience is \$106,739. A nurse in their first year of employment currently gets just \$75,773.

Speaking to the media, Health Minister Simeon Brown was forced to admit that a nurse could only make \$125,000 in a year with "overtime and allowances."

Brown brazenly attacked striking nurses for creating

"significant risks for patients." The strike, he declared, "only makes things worse for patients who are already waiting too long and it certainly does not make things safer for patients. I urge the union and Health NZ to get back around the negotiating table to end this dispute."

The real cause of the interminable waiting times for people needing treatment is the brutal austerity measures imposed by successive Labour and National Party-led governments. One of the main demands raised by healthcare workers is for safe levels of staffing.

Recruitment is being deliberately suppressed. This year, Health NZ only employed 45 percent of mid-year graduate nurses (just 323 out of 722) who applied for jobs in hospitals. The agency's acting clinical director Helen Stokes-Lampard told Radio NZ that it was operating in "a fiscally constrained environment."

Official figures show that from January to October 2024, nearly half (47.1 percent) of all hospital wards were understaffed 20 percent of the time, based on Health NZ's system, known as Care Capacity Demand Management.

Wellington nurse Pip Cresswell told Radio NZ she had quit her job as a charge nurse after having to work 60 hours a week to cover unfilled vacancies: "We've got 7000 staff in Capital and Coast-Hutt Valley and we've got 1000 positions empty."

Another protesting nurse told *Stuff* the strike was "personal for me. My cousin passed away last week. She had a heart attack and it took five hours for healthcare services to respond to her."

The government is exploiting the crisis of its own making in order to outsource thousands of operations to private hospitals. The aim is to boost the private sector and further entrench the two-tier system in which those who can pay for treatment are able to skip the public

waiting list.

There is widespread anger across the entire healthcare workforce. On May 1, more than 5,000 doctors held a nationwide one-day strike after rejecting a pay offer of 1.5 percent spread across two years. This was followed by smaller regional strikes by doctors in Gisborne and Northland.

Workers across the public sector are facing the same attacks. The Post Primary Teachers Association recently rejected an offer of 1 percent a year for three years. Over the past year, thousands of workers in the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment and the child welfare agency Oranga Tamariki have taken sporadic industrial action against the government's wage freeze.

The opposition Labour Party's health spokesperson Ayesha Verrall hypocritically postured as a supporter of striking healthcare workers, writing on Facebook: "Today, thousands of nurses stood up for patient safety and showed just how out of touch Luxon's choices are." She said the government was prioritising tax breaks for tobacco companies while hospitals were understaffed and doctor's fees were rising.

The 2017–2023 Labour government, however, oversaw a deteriorating healthcare crisis, made worse by its abandonment in 2022 of any restraints on the spread of COVID-19. Healthcare workers repeatedly struck under Labour, but the union bureaucracy kept their struggles isolated and pushed through deals which kept wages low and hospitals dangerously understaffed.

The Labour government and the NZNO finally reached a "pay equity" agreement in 2023 that increased nurses' wages by around 20 percent—ostensibly to make up for decades of underpayment—but this is now being rapidly eroded by the cost of living.

The NZNO leadership, after months of silence, has now been forced to hold a strike to defuse the anger among its members. Paul Goulter, the union's chief executive, told RNZ: "Members... need a wage offer that enables them to meet the rising cost of living."

The union's main demand, however, is for a paltry 5 percent over two years, and an extra \$2000 rate increase for senior roles. This is little better than Health NZ's offer and for most nurses it would still be a pay cut relative to inflation.

The NZNO is seeking to persuade healthcare workers

that this is the best they can hope for under the present circumstances. The bureaucracy is paving the way for a sellout agreement, as it did in 2018 and 2021.

As the economic crisis deepens, the government is making working people pay through stepped up attacks on jobs, conditions and vital services. At the same time, it is doubling the military budget to prepare for new imperialist wars. The union apparatus, composed of well-paid officials loyal to capitalism, is enforcing this agenda.

Healthcare workers want to fight, but to do so they need new organisations: rank-and-file committees that are controlled by workers themselves and are independent of the union bureaucracies. These committees will provide the means to link up with other workers in New Zealand and internationally, including Australia and the UK, where nurses and doctors are entering into struggles.

Healthcare workers should base their struggle on a socialist perspective. This means rejecting the lie that properly resourced hospitals, with well-paid staff providing care to all who need it, is "unaffordable." The necessary resources can be found by expropriating the super-rich and by ending the diversion of billions of dollars to the military.



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