New Zealand nurses hold more nationwide strikes

Tom Peters
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Some 36,000 nurses, healthcare assistants and midwives at public hospitals across New Zealand held two 24-hour strikes on September 2 and 4, in response to the right-wing National Party-led government's wage-cutting proposals and its under-staffing of the health system.

The dispute has dragged on for nearly a year, with members of the New Zealand Nurses Organisation (NZNO) holding strikes last December and in July 2025.

The government agency Health NZ is offering to increase pay by just 2 percent in 2025 and 1 percent in 2026—a significant cut relative to annual inflation, which is 2.7 percent. The real cost of living is even higher: In the 12 months to June, rents increased 3.2 percent, electricity 8.4 percent, and in the year to July food prices went up 5 percent.

The ruling class wants to set a benchmark for drastic pay reductions across the public and private sector, in order to drive up the rate of exploitation, fund tax cuts for the rich, and divert billions of dollars to the military to prepare for imperialist wars.

Thousands of doctors struck in May and 20,000 secondary teachers held a one-day strike last month after getting similar wage offers. Both disputes remain unresolved.

Health Minister Simeon Brown responded to the latest strikes by repeating his misleading claim that the "average salary for a registered nurse is now over $125,000 a year, including overtime and allowances."

In fact, the top salary for a registered nurse with several years' experience is $106,739. The starting rate is $75,773. Healthcare assistants start on just over $60,000, or $29 per hour.

Brown cynically blamed striking healthcare workers for endangering patients, saying the strikes would result in surgeries and appointments being postponed. It is the criminal underfunding of the public health system by successive Labour and National Party governments that has led to tens of thousands of people waiting months or years to receive vital operations.

With hospitals across the country freezing recruitment to cut costs, Health NZ data shows that between January and November 2024, 51 percent of day shifts and 35 percent of evening shifts were understaffed.

Workers protesting outside Hutt Hospital near Wellington during the September 4 strike told the *World Socialist Web Site* that understaffing was their biggest concern.

Trevor, who has been a healthcare assistant for longer than a decade, said nurses who used to be responsible for four patients were now covering as many as eight, and the number of healthcare assistants had halved in recent years.

He described the government's pay offer as "rubbish" and said hospital patients also supported the strike. He added: "Doctors, orderlies, cleaners, nurses, teachers—everyone, we all should go on one big strike. Then the government might listen."

Trevor said the National government was "for the rich" and was underfunding hospitals in order to "privatise them." The government is already using the crisis of its own making to justify outsourcing thousands of operations to private hospitals.

Marie, a senior nurse, said: "We're in the profession because we care, but with the staffing levels that we've got, we can't. All last week there were people leaving late, on Saturday someone left their shift three hours late.

"The other concern I have is that we're not bringing on young New Zealand-trained nurses. Te Whatu Ora

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[Health NZ] only employed one-third of those who were applying for jobs last year. We've only had two on our ward, we should have five or six."

Marie denounced Health NZ's false claims about nurses' salaries, saying "that dishonesty is really distressing for the nurses as well." She expected there would be more strikes, although none have yet been announced.

Adele, a nurse practitioner in Wellington, said when she started work in the 1980s "we had a lot more staffing to patients, we had empty beds, which we don't have any more."

She explained how the cost of living was placing pressure on hospital emergency departments, leading to longer waiting times. "It's more and more expensive to go to a [general practitioner], even with a Community Services card [for people on social welfare]. With the cost of living, the price of groceries and petrol, people just can't afford to go, and they know that we'll provide care in ED."

Adele was more concerned about unsafe staffing than about pay, but noted that senior nurses are still waiting to receive the full amount that they are owed under a "pay equity" agreement reached in 2022 during the previous Labour government. The increase of around 25 percent was ostensibly to make up for decades of underpayment based on gender.

Adele was highly critical of the so-called "life preserving services" that are mandated by Health NZ during strikes, which actually mean that there is "better patient care on strike days than on any other day of the week, in terms of ratios of staffing." She said "if we did true life preserving services like during the 80s," many more hospital workers would have been able to walk off the job.

Jocelyn, a registered nurse with 20 years' experience, said: "I think the health system's been very run-down over the past 10 years," adding that both major political parties were responsible. She worried about the impact on patients and workers, saying she had seen many nurses leave and move to Australia.

The government's pay offer was the lowest Jocelyn had ever seen. "I feel it's an insult, it's very much a slap in the face," she said. Responding to Health NZ's false statements, she stated: "I don't earn $125,000 a year. To do that, you'd be working evenings, nights, and you'd be doing every penal shift, and you'd be working full-time," which is increasingly uncommon.

There is widespread anger with the government, and workers want to fight back against its austerity agenda. The union bureaucracy, however, is keeping nurses, doctors, teachers and other workers isolated from each other to create the conditions for workers to accept a sellout agreement.

NZNO President Anne Daniels told Radio NZ that the union was calling for an annual pay rise of 3 percent, which is barely above the rate of inflation and below the real increase in the cost of living. The union is calling for safe staff-to-patient ratios—but this was also a key demand in the 2018 and 2021 disputes, which did not result in any enforceable commitment in the final agreements.

The situation facing healthcare workers calls for the building of new organisations of struggle: rank-and-file committees in every hospital and clinic, to democratically discuss how to broaden the strike by linking up with other sections of workers in New Zealand, as well as Australia and internationally. This struggle must be guided by a socialist perspective: The wealth hoarded by the super-rich and wasted on war preparations must be redirected to expand health and other vital services and to eliminate poverty and inequality.

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