

# New Zealand doctors strike amid worsening healthcare crisis

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Around 6,000 senior doctors and dentists employed in public hospitals across New Zealand held a two-day strike on September 23-24, in opposition to the National Party-led government's proposal to slash their pay.

Pickets were held outside hospitals and MPs' offices, including those of Health Minister Simeon Brown in Auckland and Finance Minister Nicola Willis in Wellington.

The doctors previously struck for 24 hours on May 1. This was followed by strikes by tens of thousands of nurses and high school teachers, who are facing similar attacks on their wages and conditions as a result of the government's austerity measures.

The government is determined to impose a benchmark for wage reductions across the public and private sector, to make workers pay for the economic crisis and the record increase in military spending.

Doctors voted 85 percent in favour of the two-day strike after receiving a revised below-inflation pay offer from government agency Health NZ in July. According to the Association of Salaried Medical Specialists (ASMS), it amounted to a pay rise of 1.16 percent per annum for three years for 90 percent of union members.

This is well below the 2.7 percent inflation rate and the actual increase in the cost of living, which is even higher. Food prices increased 5 percent in the 12 months to July and power prices went up about 11 percent in the first half of the year.

Like nurses and other healthcare workers, doctors are also angry about the severe chronic workforce shortages across the public health system. The crisis of under-staffing has worsened under successive governments, including the 2017–2023 Labour Party-led government.

One psychiatrist in Wellington, Jeremy McMinn, told

Radio NZ that even with two days on strike, he would still work 56 hours during the week, doing the work of three other doctors on one day.

Deralie Flower, a striking doctor in Auckland, told *Stuff* that low wages were pushing doctors to move to Australia. "In gynaecology, oncology, for example, we are desperately short of those surgeons in New Zealand. Our country is meant to have 16 and we currently have six," she said.

Dr Peter Dean, from Hamilton, said the shortage of psychiatrists meant severely unwell prisoners who should be receiving hospital treatment were spending "months on end locked up in cells, defecating, urinating, sitting in their mess, and we have no beds to bring them into."

At Christchurch Hospital, emergency medicine specialist Dr Dominic Fleischer told One News on September 22: "Patients are dying now, really, because of substandard care. There are patients dying in the waiting room, in corridors, or who leave and literally drop dead in the carpark. That's all happened, that's atrocious care... and it hurts the staff when things like that happen."

The emergency department is constantly in "code red," indicating severe overcrowding. It can take 45 minutes for ambulance workers to unload a patient when they arrive, Dr Fleischer said. "We need more resources. EDs across the country just need more doctors, more nurses and more space," he said.

As he did during the last nurses strike, Health Minister Brown responded to the doctors' strike by spreading disinformation about how much they are paid. He claimed that senior doctors received an average salary of \$343,500 a year—a figure that actually includes a large amount of overtime, superannuation contributions and other benefits.

Prime Minister Christopher Luxon called for binding arbitration—letting the doctors’ dispute be adjudicated by a third party—which ASMS has so far rejected.

Luxon told the *New Zealand Herald*, “we are the biggest spending government ever, in the history of New Zealand, on healthcare.” This year’s budget, however, only increased health spending by 4.77 percent (\$1.37 billion)—not enough to address the crisis of unmet need or keep pace with inflation and population growth.

Instead of investing in the public system, the government is promoting further privatisation by paying private hospitals to carry out tens of thousands of medical procedures.

Meanwhile, \$12 billion has been allocated to military spending over four years in order to participate in US-led imperialist wars, including the looming conflict with China. The drive to double military spending, which is fully supported by the opposition Labour Party, will be paid for by working people, including through cuts to healthcare and other basic services.

The Labour Party has remained silent on the latest doctors’ strike. Senior doctors repeatedly went on strike in September 2023, during the Labour-Greens government, following an 11 percent pay cut in real terms over the previous two years. That dispute was settled by ASMS for an average pay rise of just 5.7 percent, which was just above the 5.6 percent inflation rate in that year to September.

The union is now calling for the National Party-led government to nearly double the value of its offer from \$160 million to \$300 million. This would likely mean an effective wage freeze against inflation and would not make up for many years of real pay cuts.

The disputes now unfolding involve more than 100,000 teachers and healthcare workers—over 3 percent of the workforce. Workers are moving to the left and are looking for a means to fight back against the incessant attacks on their jobs, wages and conditions.

The pro-capitalist union leadership, however, is keeping each dispute isolated, imposing strict limits on industrial action, and working with the government to reach sellout agreements that will do nothing to seriously address the crisis in schools and hospitals. The Public Service Association, the country’s biggest union, which has facilitated thousands of job cuts, also

openly supports the government’s military spending.

As the Socialist Equality Group explained in its recent statement, workers can only move forward by building new organisations—independent rank-and-file committees—to take their struggles into their own hands, in opposition to the union bureaucracy and all the capitalist parties. These committees must unite healthcare workers with teachers and other workers across the country and internationally.

The fight against austerity and war must be based on a socialist strategy. Demands must be raised for the expropriation of the billionaires, the nationalization of the banks and major corporations under the democratic control of the working class, and an end to squandering resources on the military. Society’s resources, produced by the working class, must be taken out of the hands of the rich by a workers’ government and used to eliminate poverty and to vastly expand public healthcare, education and all other essential services.



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