

Australia: NSW Labor government imposes real wage cut on nurses and midwives

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2 October 2025

The New South Wales Nurses and Midwives Association (NSWNMA) announced on September 4 that an “interim” offer from the NSW Labor government for a 3 percent nominal wage “increase” had been accepted by its membership.

With the monthly inflation rate climbing to 3 percent in August, the latest meagre offer will amount to yet another real wage cut. It will do nothing to resolve the dire conditions confronting nurses and midwives, including chronic understaffing and overwork, and leave almost every demand advanced by workers unaddressed.

Against vocal opposition from nurses and midwives, the union bureaucracy has yet again utilised the illusion that the deal is only temporary to impose exactly what the government demanded: miserly pay “rises” and the suppression of any organised opposition.

When the Labor government first made its three-year, 3 percent per annum pay rise offer in 2024, it was met with forceful opposition. Nurses and midwives responded with multiple statewide mass strikes and rallies, involving tens of thousands of workers. But the NSWNMA bureaucracy has now imposed the first two thirds of this deal, on the government’s behalf.

Since late last year, the NSWNMA leadership has insisted that nurses and midwives can only advance their claim for real wage increases and improved conditions through the union’s “special case” in the state Industrial Relations Commission (IRC).

The NSWNMA readily accepted the industrial court’s condition that all industrial action be halted until the completion of the case. The union has already enforced this strike ban for 12 months. The “special case” will not announce its judgement until next year, and its decision will be binding until July 2027, meaning the strike ban will effectively remain in place for at least two-and-a-half years.

This year’s pay offer was pushed through by the union bureaucracy without so much as a suggestion of a fight. Nurses and midwives were effectively told that the choice was between taking the meagre pay rise and waiting for the

IRC, or refusing the meagre pay rise and waiting for the IRC.

Despite the NSWNMA’s promotion of the “interim” offer, opposition among nurses and midwives prompted the bureaucracy to employ an anti-democratic voting process to engineer a favourable result.

To be allowed to vote, nurses and midwives needed to be “attached to a branch ... that has met regarding the interim pay offer and met quorum for that meeting.” Nurses and midwives were told that only after such a meeting was held by their branch would they receive an individual voting link that would expire after 24 hours.

Comments in reply to one NSWNMA Facebook post show multiple workers raising that they had not received an email or text message with the voting link.

When one union member asked whether they would be able to vote if their branch no longer had a delegate, the union replied that they would need to email the union to “see if you can be allocated to another geographically proximate or specialty-specific branch,” just to participate in the vote.

In a further anti-democratic move, in reporting the ballot result, the NSWNMA has only stated that “88.2 percent of participating branches” voted in favour, with no indication of how many nurses and midwives were allowed to take part or how many voted for and against. This is clearly intended to send a message to all those who did oppose the deal that they are in a small minority among the union membership.

Following the announcement that the interim offer had been accepted, the NSWNMA social media pages received hundreds of comments from nurses and midwives expressing their opposition to the deal, stating that they and their coworkers had voted “no” and wanted to fight back against the Labor government’s attack on wages.

One worker commented, “We should just reject everything until they actually listen. The government got exactly what they wanted.”

The NSWNMA has sought to bury such critical comments with a barrage of posts promoting the “special case,” for which hearings began on Tuesday.

The union is asking the IRC to award a 35 percent pay rise (minus the two “interim” increases already awarded) over three years, starting from July 2024, as well as an increase in sick leave allowance from 10 to 20 days a year and the introduction of meal allowance for patient transport service workers.

In its case, the union has cited the low rates of pay for nurses over many years, describing them as “undervalued” and not being compensated with any reference to the increasing complexity of their work.

In this context, a 35 percent pay rise over three years would be a drop in the ocean, far short of what is needed to make up for the real wage cuts imposed—by both Labor and Liberal-National governments, aided and abetted by the NSWNMA bureaucracy—on nurses and midwives in just the past several years.

Between July 2020 and June 2025, the cost of living, according to official figures, increased by 24 percent, while NSW nurses and midwives’ wages rose just 13 percent. In Sydney, the cost of renting an apartment has increased by more than 36 percent in the past three years alone.

In the unlikely event that the IRC awards everything the NSWNMA is asking for, far from being compensated for “historic” underpayment, nurses and midwives will be no better off in real terms than they were a decade ago.

But even the NSWNMA leadership has admitted “we do not expect to get the full amount we have claimed” from the IRC!

The reality is that the NSWNMA’s promotion of the IRC as a fair and impartial body, independent of the Labor government, is a fraud. The industrial tribunal is a part of the state apparatus, tasked with enforcing Labor’s austerity agenda and suppressing the class struggle through the illegalisation of strikes and other industrial action.

The NSWNMA bureaucracy is promoting the lie that nurses and midwives can win better wages and conditions through the IRC, not because it is ignorant of the court’s role, but because it agrees with it. The NSWNMA and all other unions rely on the industrial courts and the draconian laws they enforce as a pretext to shut down strikes and to divide workers, workplace by workplace and profession by profession.

Similar mechanisms have been and are being used by the other health unions to impose the Labor government’s attacks on wages and conditions throughout the NSW public sector.

The Health Services Union (HSU), which covers radiographers, orderlies, cleaners, security guards, catering workers and administrative staff, among others, also recently concluded a deal with the state Labor government, which includes a miserly 4 percent per annum wage increase for

2025 and 2026.

The offer was promoted favourably by the union bureaucracy, who made clear that if workers rejected the deal, the union would not organise any fight back and would only “revert back to the IRC” for a determination.

A three-day statewide strike by doctors in April was shut down by the Australian Salaried Medical Officers Federation (ASMOF), which promoted illusions that they could improve their conditions through IRC arbitration. Last month, the doctors again voted overwhelmingly to reject the Labor government’s latest meagre pay offer, but ASMOF has not organised a single action, instead proceeding with its legal manoeuvres.

To fight for real improvements to their wages and conditions, nurses and midwives need to turn to these other sections of workers for support. They must reject the union lies that their interests can be advanced through the pro-business industrial courts.

What is posed is the necessity for a unified struggle by health workers against a common assault by the Labor government. The corporatised trade unions, which do not represent the interests of workers but those of governments and big business, are actively blocking such a struggle.

Health workers need to take matters into their own hands. Rank-and-file committees must be built in every hospital and health facility to allow workers to plan a campaign of political and industrial action. A turn must be made to health workers, and public sector workers more broadly, across Australia who face similar attacks under the austerity agenda spearheaded by the federal Labor government.

The fight for better wages and conditions for nurses, midwives and other health workers is inseparable from the struggle for a high-quality public health system, and against the chronic underfunding and staff shortages responsible for the appalling conditions and dangerous delays confronting patients.

What is required is a socialist program and perspective, to establish a workers’ government that places healthcare as well as the banks and corporations under public ownership and democratic workers’ control, to direct resources to meet human needs, not private profit.



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