The defence of public healthcare in New Zealand is inseparable from the fight for socialism

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The deepening crisis in the public healthcare system is a major issue facing the working class in the New Zealand election being held tomorrow. Hospitals are chronically understaffed, emergency departments overcrowded, and tens of thousands of patients face lengthy delays for specialist appointments and treatment.

According to the Ministry of Health, in the second quarter of 2026 about one-third of patients referred to see a specialist—66,639 people—were waiting longer than four months for their first appointment. The number waiting longer than 12 months was 6,943.

This week the *New Zealand Herald* reported that 85 nurses at Starship Children's Hospital sent a letter to Health NZ warning that due to staffing shortages "the chances of us making a mistake are extremely high.… It could cost someone's life." Children have faced delays in receiving cancer treatment, which can have severe and even life-threatening consequences.

The country has a two-tier healthcare system that is becoming more and more entrenched. The rich have the ability to bypass the public waiting list and receive the best treatment money can buy. The National Party-led government has diverted billions of dollars to private hospitals by outsourcing procedures from the public system, strengthening the role of the private, for-profit sector.

The Socialist Equality Group (SEG), whose candidate Tom Petterson is standing in the Hutt South electorate, warns that the election will not resolve the crisis. The next government, whichever party leads it, will continue to starve the healthcare system, at the expense of workers' lives and wellbeing.

The opposition Labour Party, led by Chris Hipkins, is campaigning on false promises to "make healthcare more affordable." Labour, however, has committed itself to operating "within the same budget allowances" as National, including almost the same level of spending on hospitals.

Labour's Medicard scheme would provide people with three free doctor's appointments annually, but only from July 2028. This will be funded through a modest 28 percent capital gains tax on profits from sales of investment properties and commercial property. The scheme is estimated to cost $553 million annually, equivalent to about 1.6 percent of the current health budget. Alongside reduced prescription charges, it might save someone around $300 a year—a drop in the ocean compared with what is needed to fix the health crisis.

The previous Labour government, in office from 2017 to 2023, presided over chronic staffing shortages, hospital overcrowding and stagnating wages. After Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern ended the country's COVID-19 elimination policy in 2022 and allowed the virus to spread across the country, thousands of people died and hospitals were overwhelmed.

Under Labour, the New Zealand Nurses Organisation (NZNO) imposed multiple sellout agreements, after the 2018, 2021 strikes and again in 2023. In 2018, following nationwide strikes, the NZNO pushed through a deal amounting to 9 percent over three years—an effective wage freeze. In 2023 union members accepted a "pay equity" deal that increased wages by 18–20 percent, in line with male-dominated professions, but failed to address the understaffing crisis. Most of that pay rise has already been consumed by rising living costs in the years since.

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The consequences are starkly visible at Hutt Hospital. In August, nurses reported to *Kaitiaki* that patients were being accommodated in reclining chairs rather than hospital beds, while others remained in Emergency Department corridors for up to 10 hours. On one occasion, a department was reportedly short of 10 nurses, yet requests for additional overtime staffing were declined. Nurses also reported extensive water leaks affecting ceilings, electrical fittings and treatment areas.

Such conditions, which exist nationwide in one form or another, are the consequences of decades of inadequate investment by successive governments. A 54-year-old father, Brent Horsburgh, died in a toilet after waiting nine hours to receive medical treatment at Waikato Hospital's ED in June.

A recent study by University of Auckland surgeons Cameron Wells and Ian Bissett examined the relationship between nursing levels and surgical patient outcomes during 2022–2024, i.e. mostly during the Labour government. It linked 182 deaths per year to inadequate nurse numbers on surgical wards.

While healthcare is starved of funding, the National-led government is dramatically expanding military spending. In 2025 it committed $13 billion over four years to the armed forces.

The Labour Party agrees with the military spend-up, which is aimed at integrating New Zealand more closely into the US-led military build-up directed against China. No party, except the SEG, is talking about the fact that these war preparations will be paid for by intensifying the attacks on healthcare, education, welfare and other essential public services.

The SEG rejects the lie that society lacks the resources to provide universal, high-quality public healthcare. Our demands include a massive expansion of public healthcare funding, including the training and recruitment of thousands more doctors, nurses and support workers.

Hospitals and clinics must be rebuilt, upgraded and expanded to eliminate all barriers to timely, high-quality diagnosis and treatment. Healthcare must be guaranteed as a fundamental social right, not treated as a commodity determined by personal wealth.

These changes will not be achieved through parliament. They require the political mobilisation of healthcare workers and the entire working class against austerity and war. This in turn requires a break from the union bureaucracy, which is seeking to channel opposition to the healthcare crisis into the Labour Party's election campaign.

The unions have repeatedly betrayed healthcare workers' struggles, including the "mega strike" of October 2025 involving 100,000 nurses, doctors, teachers, and broader layers of the working class. The bureaucracy proceeded to divide and isolate these workers, in order to push through below-inflation pay deals.

The SEG calls on healthcare workers to build new organisations: rank-and-file committees, independent of the union bureaucracy and democratically controlled by workers themselves. Such committees must link up with other workers who are entering into struggles over wages and conditions, in New Zealand and internationally.

The struggle to defend and expand public healthcare is inseparable from the fight for socialism because genuinely universal healthcare is incompatible with the requirements of the profit system. The SEG calls for the banks and major corporations to be placed under public ownership and democratic workers' control, so that the wealth created by the working class can be directed towards meeting human needs, rather than being hoarded by a wealthy few.

The SEG urges healthcare workers and all working people to support our election campaign and, if you are in Hutt South, to vote for Tom Petterson. Most importantly, we urge workers to join the fight to build a revolutionary socialist party in New Zealand, as a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International.

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