

Striking New South Wales nurses reveal dire conditions in Australian hospitals

Our reporters
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Tens of thousands of New South Wales (NSW) public hospital nurses struck yesterday, in defiance of a ban issued by the state Industrial Relations Commission on Monday.

More than 30 rallies were held across the state, with the largest, outside NSW parliament in Sydney, attended by several thousand workers.

The NSW Nurses and Midwives' Association (NSWNMA) was compelled to call the action, the first statewide nurses' strike since 2013, for fear of the explosive anger build up among health workers over longstanding staff shortages, declining pay and "impossible" conditions exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The NSWNMA divided nurses up with the strike observed at different times at different hospitals. At the rallies, the union officials sought to suppress any discussion of the broader COVID crisis. The union speakers presented the disaster in the hospitals as solely being the result of NSW Premier Dominic Perrottet's right-wing proclivities. They alternatively denounced Perrottet and begged him to "come to the table." There was no mention of further action.

In opposition to this, Socialist Equality Party campaigners raised the need to broaden the struggle to include the entire health and aged care sector, as well as teachers and other workers. The fight for decent wages and conditions for workers on the frontlines of the pandemic cannot be separated from the struggle against the criminal "let it rip" policies of the ruling elite and for the elimination of COVID-19.

Such a perspective cannot be advanced within the unions or the Labor Party which have played a key role in keeping workers on the job in unsafe conditions throughout the pandemic. It requires a fight to build independent rank-and-file committees in every hospital and workplace.

Nurses told the SEP campaigners about the conditions they confront and why they went on strike.

Sofia said: "I am here protesting for our rights in the hospitals, for safe patient ratios, a pay rise and acknowledgement for all our hard work over the last two

years. I have been a nurse for four years and this is my first strike. I work in general medicine, but we were a COVID ward for many months. It has been intense and overwhelming.

"I caught COVID and I didn't get any pay from the government, it had to come out of my sick pay. They asked me to come back to work when I was asymptomatic. There is a risk in that.

"I think we are happy to help people who are sick, but we want to be safe. We want it on our terms. That is what our job is; to care for the sick, to care for people that need our help. We cannot do it safely in these conditions.

"There is compassion fatigue, fatigue in general. Long COVID exists, a lot of my co-workers are unhappy. I have never not wanted to stop nursing as much as I do now. What a waste of all the effort I have put in. I love caring for people but it is not fun anymore."

Bronwyn, a registered nurse in Newcastle, said: "I got a massive shock when I started my new grad year about four years ago and I realised that everything we'd been taught in uni, all of our training, was nothing like the reality that was in hospitals. It's just disheartening. You go out to do the best that you can do, but there's just not enough nurses for the amount of patients and what we're expected to do."

Bronwyn said she was routinely overseeing the care of up to 16 patients. She stated: "It's very overwhelming, you can't keep up. You've got someone over there who's about to fall over, someone who's trying to punch someone in the face, this person is very unwell, they need antibiotics now, this person needs pain relief now. If you're looking after a palliative care patient, they need extra care and you just don't have enough hands.

"Sometimes you start your shift at 1:30 p.m., work until 10 and then they're short on staff overnight so you continue working until 7 in the morning. It's very, very common.

"When I left to go on maternity leave, I left absolutely in tears, I could not wait to get away from the hospital. A lot of people want to leave the profession because we just can't keep up with the standards that are expected of us. It's

impossible.”

A nurse with 10 years’ experience who works on a COVID ward in a western Sydney hospital said: “All the restrictions are eased but we have the same number of patients coming to the hospital requiring ventilators. We still have a lot of COVID-19 patients and they have taken all the hospital beds, but we don’t have enough staff to work on the floor.

“Every shift is short staffed. There are a lot of patients but less nurses. The government says we can cope, but how can we cope? It’s about the health and safety of the patients. If we had a ratio of one nurse to four patients then we could do something about it, but when we have ratios of one to seven or eight then how can we cope?”

“We have very sick COVID patients, their oxygen saturation drops so we have to monitor them 24/7. One nurse can only look after three patients, but we were given five, up to six patients. How are we supposed to look after all of them? If one patient deteriorates then the care is neglected for the other five.”

George, a community care nurse in Sydney’s Eastern Suburbs, said: “In a pandemic you need the right equipment and training, you need nurses. You have to provide proper care, you have to fund it, and politicians have to realise they have got to do that. Everyone deserves fair funding for this system.

“We are mainly here to look after our people, our community, give them proper respect and dignity, and give them the proper care they all deserve. We don’t want older people being left in their faeces and urine because there are not enough staff to look after them.”

A Sydney nurse with 22 years experience working in the health industry said: “Since COVID, it’s more difficult. We get deployed to various places depending on staff shortages and very often it’s somewhere I have no experience at all, so I’m there as a number but I’m not very useful. For example, I work in theatre, but I got deployed to a discharge lounge, which is a completely different sort of work, focussed on one-on-one patient contact.”

Michael, a nurse who works in an Emergency Department in Western Sydney, said: “I am here, like a lot of my co-workers, because we are sick and tired of doing more for less. Looking after more patients or the same number of patients, but having less and less nursing staff.

“A lot of my colleagues are dropping like flies around me. They get a swab at work, test positive and have to go home. It is happening quite a lot. Unfortunately, those colleagues have to take sick leave. The government is not paying them any compensation for the risk of working around COVID.

“I believe that the government is putting more effort into rebuilding the economy rather than saving lives.”

A registered nurse at a Sydney hospital told our reporters: “In my ward we had good staffing that we fought really hard for previously, but during COVID we’ve had to go to skeleton staffing and most nurses didn’t get to have a break until they got COVID. My friend did seven 12-hour shifts in a row. That’s not safe at all.”

She said the gruelling conditions were taking a huge mental toll on “every nurse that I’ve encountered. There is no compensation for it. We get a clap, and we’re called heroes. It’s pathetic.”

The nurse identified the murderous role played by Australian governments in removing public health measures as the Omicron variant began to take hold in December.

She explained: “When they said no more masks, no more having to check in, once they did three days of that, it went to shit straight away. The ‘let it rip’ mentality has caused so many deaths, has caused severe burnout, it’s impacted literally everybody, but especially nursing staff and healthcare staff. It’s not safe, anything that’s going on.

“We are the voices of many, many, many people who are in the process of trying to understand why governments are doing this. This is the start of a big thing—the first strike in over a decade. The working class has never mattered to politicians. It’s really good to see people strike because this is how we get our voices heard. It’s like the workers’ movement in the seventies—we need that energy again now, and I think this is a good start.”



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