

Australia: Striking NSW health workers speak out against dire wages and conditions

Our reporters

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Thousands of nurses and midwives rallied across New South Wales (NSW) yesterday, demanding real improvements to pay and conditions, in the face of a wage-slashing “offer” from the Labor government.

The NSW Nurses and Midwives’ Association, having promoted Labor’s election as a panacea last year, is now seeking to limit nurses to plaintive appeals to the administration. In opposition, Socialist Equality Party campaigners raised the need for a unified struggle by nurses, health staff and all workers, against the big business Labor government and the subordination of health and other vital social services to corporate profit interests. Read a full report on the rallies.

Reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to striking health workers in Newcastle and Sydney.

At the Newcastle rally, a **nurse** told WSWs reporters: “I’m out here today because of short-staffing and not enough pay. I work in the Emergency Department. We are three to four people short per day, it puts us under a lot of pressure. There is a lot of overtime work done; I have two double shifts lined up after this rally here today. One tonight and another tomorrow.

“The 9.5 percent from [NSW Labor Premier Chris] Minns is a disgrace. I don’t think either Labor or Liberal cares. The military gets funding, the police get funding, but you look at healthcare, we get nothing. It’s a hard situation. They always promise and promise and promise and we get nothing.”

Another Newcastle **nurse** told the WSWs: “I feel that I am a socialist. I believe that public health should have been kept in the hands of the government. Utilities should be government owned to provide a service to people, not make money for corporate shareholders and let CEOs reap the benefits of \$2-3 million bonuses and wages.

“It seems to me that a lot of money goes to useless infrastructure rather than grassroots spending; I really don’t think it is different with either the Labor or Liberal government in office. It’s disgraceful that the federal [Labor] government is cutting billions from health; it seems that the military is getting the billions of dollars.”

In Sydney, **Kayla** said: “We are understaffed. The patient load is very difficult to manage. I’m burnt out, I’m ready to leave the profession. It took me three years to gain my qualifications and now, after five years working as a nurse, I’m ready to get out.

“Minns came into government promising to improve things but that didn’t happen. They want top care for the bare minimum pay. It’s depressing.”

A **community midwife** who has worked in Britain as well as Australia said: “Compared to the UK, midwives there with the same qualifications get much higher pay and opportunities to get into management roles or into research roles. Here, it’s hard to get study days to be able to gain those higher qualifications.

“The working conditions here are much worse. We are understaffed and the decision to understaff us is coming from above, not the management. My friends in the UK used to think Australia was a good place to come to work as a midwife but they are not coming today, there is no incentive.

“The increased mortgage rates have definitely affected us. We’ve got a place to stay but I know midwives who don’t.”

Lucas, a mental health nurse, said: “The working conditions are getting worse. The ratios of patients to staff are not improving. There is no security in the mental health unit, while the ice epidemic is always increasing.

“We are expected to take the brunt without much

support. There's never enough resources, never enough staff. There are a lot more presentations of young people coming in, we've had kids of 10 and 11 years of age coming to triage."

A **nurse** at the Parramatta rally said: "The hospitals are put under so much stress, yet we're just told to suck it up and deal with it rather than giving us more support.

"When we're taught, there's time to talk to patients, get to know them, do the best for them. But in reality sometimes you rarely see your patients the way you want. There's so many things you have to do that you don't feel like you're giving your best work."

A **pediatric nurse** said: "This is a fight that's been a long time coming. We've been treated too unfairly for far too long.

"On the floor, ratios are non-existent in NSW, so we have to tend to numerous patients. Midwives are working longer hours and more days, and we have managers working night shift to cover those shifts that couldn't be covered.

"We're losing nursing students and staff by the droves. No one wants to stay in nursing anymore. There's too much pressure for less pay, too much responsibility for less pay. People are more and more acutely sick coming in, kids are getting sicker, adults are coming in with co-morbidities that we are having to spend more time treating."

Indira, a nurse from Blacktown hospital, said: "Living expenses are increasing and the pay rate is not matching up with expenses. I came to Australia in 2008 from Nepal as a student. I was able to save more money then compared to now, and I wasn't a nurse!

"I sometimes feel like changing my job. It is not because it is not satisfying, but when I look at the pay and when I go shopping, with the cost of having children, the ongoing prices of housing, it is just not matching at all. I think about going to another state, but that would only resolve my problem, not everyone's problem."

Sharad said: "Before the election Minns was promising to change the conditions in hospitals, but he's not keeping his promises. With the cost of living Labor should be improving things, not making them worse. A lot of permanent staff are leaving for better pay and conditions in other states. We get a lot of casual staff which is compromising patient care.

Maxine, from Nepean hospital, said: "Mortgages are going up, house prices, everything is going up. But nurses, who have a professional and sought-after job, can't even afford basic living costs these days. A lot of us came today because we have families that we need to support at home and our pay doesn't seem to be reflecting the cost of living."

She was not surprised that the Minns Labor government has done nothing: "Politicians are always lying. They get into a position and they don't follow their promises."



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