

Australia: Thousands of nurses strike across New South Wales against Labor's wage cuts

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Public sector nurses and midwives walked off the job across New South Wales (NSW) yesterday, striking for 12.5 hours in opposition to the Labor government's real-wage slashing offer.

The state government, led by Premier Chris Minns, has offered health workers, along with most other public sector employees, a nominal pay rise of just 9.5 percent over three years, less than the current official inflation rate of 3.8 percent, itself a vast understatement of the soaring cost of living.

The NSW Nurses and Midwives' Association (NSWNMA) has advanced a demand for a 15 percent pay rise this year, itself totally insufficient to make up for previous cuts imposed in union-government agreements.

Defying attempts by the Labor government to stop the strike and an order banning it by the Industrial Relations Commission on Monday, nurses and midwives proceeded with rallies, involving hundreds or even thousands of workers, at 20 locations around the state.

Many of the striking health workers brought hand-made placards and banners denouncing the refusal of the Labor government to increase wages or address the increasingly catastrophic state of the public health system.

Nurses and midwives told *World Socialist Web Site* reporters they faced chronic short-staffing and overwork. As a result, many are "burnt out" and unsure whether they can continue in the profession, even after only a few years. They noted that the onslaught on pay, amid a cost-of-living crisis, was forcing nurses and midwives to either leave the profession or seek better (although still inadequate) pay and conditions across the border in Queensland. Read more comments from striking nurses and midwives [here](#).

As a result of this mounting anger, the NSWNMA was compelled to call yesterday's strike and mass rallies, having previously tried to constrain workers' opposition to the government's cuts within sporadic and isolated protests outside individual hospitals.

However, the rallies were designed by the NSWNMA bureaucracy, not to provide a way for workers to take their struggle forward, but as a diversion.

In line with this, a carnival-like atmosphere was whipped up at the rallies, with striking workers encouraged to sing and dance along with blaring pop music from the moment they

arrived. At the largest demonstration, outside Minns' electorate office in Kogarah, speeches by union officials were interspersed with dance breaks.

This was a conscious attempt by the NSWNMA leadership to limit discussion between workers and cover over the serious political issues confronting nurses and midwives in this dispute.

The public health system, in NSW and throughout the country, is in a profound state of crisis. Just in recent weeks, this has been starkly expressed in revelations of a nationwide shortage of IV fluids and the rationing of dialysis treatment in Western Sydney. Most recently, gynaecologists and obstetricians at Gosford and Wyong hospitals have been forced to cancel all non-urgent appointments due to a massive shortage of staffing and resources.

The dire state of the public health system is a direct result of decades of funding cuts and privatisation, carried out by Labor and Liberal-National governments and facilitated by the NSWNMA and other health unions. Over the past four years, this has been exacerbated by the COVID pandemic, which, under the "let it rip" policy embraced by all governments and backed by the unions, has brought hospitals to their knees and resulted in more than 25,000 excess deaths.

In 2022, NSW nurses took mass strike action against wage cuts and these dire conditions. The NSWNMA sold out this struggle, imposing a sub-inflationary pay deal and insisting that workers support the Labor Party in the March 2023 state election. The resulting Minns Labor government has continued and deepened the assault on public health—as the union bureaucrats knew that it would—in line with the austerity agenda of Labor governments at federal, state and territory level around the country.

Despite this, the NSWNMA continues to promote illusions that nurses and midwives can take forward their fight through plaintive appeals to the very government that is attacking them. At the Newcastle rally, NSWNMA assistant secretary Michael Waites triumphantly declared "finally we will be sitting down on Thursday with the treasurer, Daniel Mookhey, with the health minister, Ryan Park, and the minister for IR [industrial relations], Sophie Cotsis."

NSWNMA secretary Shaye Candish, speaking at the Kogarah rally, noted that "nurses and midwives campaigned hard for

this government, [which] gave us hope for change.”

Now, Candish lamented, the Minns government had “ignored us and taken us for granted,” refusing to negotiate on pay, even though the union had “found the productivity savings needed” to fund the “reasonable” claim for a 15 percent pay increase this year.

“Productivity savings” is a codeword for cuts to hospital funding and conditions. In other words, even as the public healthcare system is in its worst crisis in decades, the NSWNMA bureaucrats are working with the Labor government to slash resources to the sector further. Only the naive would think that union officials attacking healthcare are simultaneously seeking to increase the pay of nurses.

In reality, Candish and her fellow bureaucrats have opposed and sabotaged calls from rank-and-file nurses this year for a higher pay demand. They reacted with intense hostility to a call in April by 1,200 nurses and midwives for the NSWNMA to fight for a 30 percent pay increase, as well as another campaign, supported by some 14,000 workers, calling for nurses and midwives to delay renewing their professional registration unless the government produced a better pay offer.

In other words, for all of their bluster about the government’s “betrayal” and its failure to “come to the negotiating table,” Candish and co. are functioning as the agents of this big-business administration against nurses and other health workers.

With their role ever more exposed, the NSWNMA officials have resorted increasingly to the promotion of reactionary upper-middle-class gender politics, presenting the issues facing nurses, including low pay, as the result of misogyny targeting a workforce that is majority female. Candish stated that “the issues we are facing are down to the inherent gender bias” and “structural inequities.”

This followed the statement by NSWNMA president O’Bray Smith that the Minns government “got rid of the unfair wages cap and instead they are putting in an unfair glass ceiling.”

These are the foul politics of division and diversion. They are aimed at separating workers by gender, within the health sector and more broadly. Male nurses and health staff, it should be noted, have been subjected to the same pay cuts as their female counterparts.

Workers in “male-dominated” industries are facing the exact same austerity agenda. That is the significance of the federal Labor government’s imposition of quasi-dictatorial control over the construction division of the Construction, Forestry and Maritime Employees Union. The appointment of an unelected administrator over the union is clearly aimed at slashing the pay and conditions of construction workers.

At the state level, the wage cap, contrary to the NSWNMA bureaucrats, effectively remains in force with all public sector workers being hit with real wage cuts.

Even its rotten gender politics involves a promotion of the state Labor government. Candish told nurses they should appeal

“to the women of this government to help and to stand up for us,” as though there is any distinction between right-wing, pro-business politicians who happen to be women and those who happen to be men.

The NSWNMA bureaucracy is deliberately seeking to weaken workers by dividing them and sowing confusion. This is an attempt to prevent nurses and midwives from understanding that they are up against a wholesale assault on the entire working class, led by Labor governments, and from drawing the necessary conclusion, that such an attack can only be fought through a unified struggle involving broad layers of workers from all sections of industry.

Such a counteroffensive is impossible within the framework of the trade unions, which are intimately connected to the Labor Party, and which maintain tightly controlled lines of separation and division between workers as a means of suppressing dissent.

To break through this isolation, nurses and midwives need to take matters into their own hands. Rank-and-file committees, politically and organisationally independent of any union, must be built in every hospital and health facility. These will provide a venue for nurses and midwives to develop demands based on their actual needs, not what governments or union bureaucrats say is “reasonable,” and a plan of action through which to fight for them.

Through a network of such committees, nurses and midwives can link up with other sections of workers, including other health workers covered by the Health Services Union and other public sector workers across NSW, as well as workers throughout the working class.

This will provide the basis for a unified political and industrial struggle against Labor, the unions, and the capitalist profit system itself, which is totally incompatible with the needs of ordinary people, including access to high-quality public healthcare, with decent pay and conditions for workers.



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