

Australia: More than 10,000 nurses and midwives strike against Labor government cuts

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25 September 2024

More than 10,000 nurses and midwives rallied across New South Wales (NSW) yesterday in a 24-hour strike against the Labor government's real-wage slashing pay offer. This followed a 12.5 hour strike on September 10.

The state Labor 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.

The main demonstration, outside NSW Parliament in Macquarie St, Sydney, was attended by at least 9,000 nurses and midwives, according to organisers. Many had travelled for several hours to take part, including a group from Manning Base Hospital in Taree, more than 300 kilometres north.

It was, by a substantial margin, the largest rally by NSW health workers since the mass strikes in early 2022 against the then Liberal-National state government.

The attendance expresses the mounting hostility among nurses and midwives to the Labor government, which is seeking to cut real wages, even as working conditions in the public health system become increasingly dire. At the Sydney rally, striking nurses and midwives spoke with *World Socialist Web Site* reporters about the worsening crisis they confront in the state's hospitals.

The anger and frustration of nurses and midwives is part of a broader growth of animosity towards Labor. At the state level and federally, Labor governments are presiding over the worst attack on working-class living conditions in decades, while channelling vast resources towards the military in a drive towards global conflict.

That is what the Health Workers Rank-and-File Committee warned of during the mass strikes in 2022. The NSWNMA sold out that struggle, imposing real wage cuts and insisting that electing a state Labor government would improve the pay and conditions of nurses. That was a deliberate fraud, perpetrated

by an NSWNMA bureaucracy that functions as a partner of the big business Labor government.

With their lies increasingly exposed, the NSWNMA officials are trying to cover their tracks. They are making limited criticisms of the Minns government, with Secretary Shaye Candish for instance telling the rally: "This government promised reform, promised hope. But it was all hollow."

In fact, Minns expressed his hostility to the 2022 strikes as they were occurring and pledged that his government would be one of fiscal responsibility. He explicitly stated that even nominal wage increases would be paid for in the form of "productivity" gains, i.e., increased exploitation and worsened conditions, amid what was already a massive crisis of the public healthcare system.

The half-hearted and duplicitous criticisms of the NSWNMA now are intended to obscure the culpability of the union leadership and to block any genuine struggle against the Labor government.

That is why the union is suddenly claiming that the real reason nurses' pay is under attack is because of misogyny directed against a workforce that is majority-female. This promotion of upper middle-class feminist politics is an exercise in diversion and division. Its function is to obscure the fundamental class division of society, between working people who are suffering a massive cost-of-living crisis, increasing poverty and crisis-ridden services, and an ultra-wealthy elite represented by Labor and the union bureaucracy itself.

The phoney feminist line serves to balkanise workers even within the profession. While 86 percent of nurses and midwives are women, that still means there are some 7,000 male nurses and midwives in the NSW public sector who are subject to exactly the same attack as their female colleagues. In public health more broadly, thousands of men who work alongside nurses and midwives every day likewise face yet another real wage cut at the hands of the state Labor government.

This divisive line was expressed sharply by Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) President Michele O'Neil, who declared, "the men of Macquarie St are not listening to the women of this mighty union."

O’Neil did not mention the word “Labor” once in her speech, instead referring vaguely to “the NSW government.” That is because she is an agent of the very Labor Party that is attacking workers’ pay.

O’Neil and other ACTU leaders were involved in imposing a major attack on the rights of workers just months before she was paraded before nurses. The ACTU collaborated with Labor to place the construction division of the Construction, Forestry and Maritime Employees Union (CFMEU) under state administration, a form of de facto dictatorship.

That has nothing to do with untested and unproven allegations of corruption. It was an operation involving the Labor government, property developers and the ACTU to discipline a militant section of the working class and to create the conditions for pay cuts to construction as is more or less openly admitted in the financial press.

O’Neil did not say a word about this and nor did her hosts in the NSWNMA bureaucracy. Their promotion of O’Neil is an endorsement of the attack on building workers. It underscores the purely for show character of their criticisms of the Labor government.

The attack on the CFMEU also refutes the gender politics of the nurses’ union. O’Neil and ACTU Secretary Sally McManus happen to be women. They have played an integral role in a major government-corporate attack on a section of workers that happens to be “majority male.” Regardless of their gender, O’Neil and McManus, along with Candish for that matter, are representatives of a well-heeled bureaucracy that collaborates with governments and corporations against the workers they falsely claim to represent.

Michael Whaites, assistant secretary of the NSWNMA, decided that the best way to promote the gender line of the union was by simply lying. Without providing any proof at all, and in defiance of all evidence and objective reality, Whaites asserted workers in male-dominated industries were receiving major pay rises. He declared: “The reason [the gender pay gap] is getting worse is that male-dominated unions are getting pay rises that you are not. ... While you get offered below-inflation 3 percent, the men are leaving us behind and it’s this Labor government that’s orchestrating it.”

In addition to ignoring the attack on the CFMEU while standing alongside someone who has helped to perpetrate it, this was particularly absurd in the context of Whaites’ reference just moments earlier to “our friends in the Rail, Tram and Bus Union”—rail workers who are in a struggle against the same wage-cutting government offer as the nurses.

The rally pointed to plans of the NSWNMA bureaucracy to wind up any struggle by nurses. O’Neil’s presence itself was a warning. The ACTU officials are invariably wheeled out when the bureaucracy is preparing a sell-out agreement with the governments and employers.

Whaites’ comments indicated one mechanism that the bureaucracy may use, with him declaring: “We have a

government who is going to sit back and let the Industrial Relations Commission sort it out for them.”

Unlike in previous years, the NSWNMA bureaucracy has been unable to quietly drop the wage claim demanded by members. This means it may not be possible for the union to claim victory on the basis of minor concessions and promises as it has done in the past. Whaites is planting the seed for an alternative outcome, in which the state industrial courts impose the will of the Labor government over a show of opposition by the NSWNMA bureaucracy.

At the same time, the NSWNMA is seeking to divert nurses behind plaintive appeals to the government and vague suggestions that future elections may resolve the issues. Candish declared that it was necessary to “appeal to members of parliament,” especially “women in marginal seats.” This is an even more transparently bankrupt perspective than the union’s call for the election of a Labor government in 2022.

Nurses need to draw certain conclusions. The role of the NSWNMA leadership, in imposing past sellouts and isolating the current struggle, is not a mistake. It expresses the fact that the union bureaucracy is a privileged layer, tied to the employers and to government, and hostile to any genuine struggle for improved pay and conditions.

Nurses and midwives need to take matters into their own hands. That means establishing rank-and-file committees, politically and organisationally independent of any union, 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.

This struggle must be based on an understanding of what they are truly up against—a wholesale assault on the working class, led by Labor governments. This means that a counteroffensive must involve workers from every industry.

Through a network of rank-and-file committees, nurses and midwives can link up with other sections of workers, starting with other health, public sector and rail workers across NSW. In direct opposition to the union-imposed isolation, this must include a turn to the tens of thousands of building workers who have rallied in recent weeks against Labor government attacks.

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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