

New Zealand nurses hold more strikes

Tom Peters
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More than 30,000 nurses, healthcare assistants and midwives across New Zealand have taken part in a series of four-hour strikes over the past 10 days, with different parts of the country striking on different days. The latest actions follow an eight-hour nationwide strike on December 3.

Members of the New Zealand Nurses Organisation (NZNO) voted overwhelmingly to strike after learning that the government agency Health NZ Te Whatu Ora would only offer a pay rise of about 1.5 percent over the next two years. This would be a major pay cut, under conditions where household living costs have increased by at least 3.8 percent in the past year.

This is part of the brutal austerity agenda being imposed by the National Party-led coalition government. This week, in an attack on the country's lowest-paid workers, the government announced that the country's legal minimum wage will increase next year by just 1.5 percent. This sets a benchmark for slashing wages across the public sector and in private businesses.

On Tuesday, about 3,000 public servants at the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment began limited work-to-rule industrial action after receiving a zero percent pay offer.

Health NZ and the Ministry of Health have already announced more than 2,000 job cuts so far this year, according to Radio NZ. This includes vital "back office" roles such as IT and administrative workers, as well as public health experts.

On December 10, RNZ reported that Health NZ is halting or deferring 136 data and digital-related projects, including "upgrades to improve booking systems and staff rosters, and upgrades in gynaecology and radiology technology."

Hospitals are already drastically understaffed, a major issue for striking workers, who will be forced to do more administrative and clerical tasks due to the recent

cuts. Health NZ recently suspended the use of Care Capacity Demand Management, a mechanism to determine minimum staffing requirements on hospital wards.

On December 10, NZNO chief executive Paul Goulter told RNZ the union was still holding talks with Health NZ but he gave few details of the discussions, other than saying a resolution was still a long way off. The union bureaucracy has not announced any specific wage demand. Goulter said they were pushing for Health NZ to commit to enforceable nurse-to-patient ratios. Safe staffing ratios, however, are not compatible with the billions of dollars in cuts being made by the government.

The WSWWS spoke with some nurses on strike outside Wellington Hospital on December 18.

Michelle, who has been a nurse for 24 years, said that when she started in her career "we had time to sit down and talk with patients. We were able to proactively educate people about their circumstances and try to prevent them from re-admitting, and we don't get the time for that any more."

She said "people are a lot sicker by the time they get to hospital" than was the case in the past. This was due to people not getting treatment soon enough, as well as the ageing population. "Primary healthcare has been eroded and so we are feeling the fallout. I would like to see it financed to stop people coming to hospital."

Michelle said she was "not surprised" by Health NZ's low offer. "Basically, they get given [limited] money to pay for healthcare and the easiest people to take it from are the staff. They need to meet the directives from the government."

She said the "back office" staff cuts would inevitably have an impact on nurses. "When things go wrong, like the computer system, how will we recover from that?" She pointed out that doctors, orderlies, cleaners and other hospital staff all faced the same pressure on their

wages and conditions.

“Nursing takes its toll on you emotionally, it takes its toll on you sleep-wise, because it’s shift work. We have the highest rates of breast cancer of any profession. I’ve had to give up my interests in team sport; I can’t commit to getting to practices and games.” She said younger nurses with families faced even harder struggles. “I don’t want to see young people working their guts out and then leaving burned out and disgusted at the system.”

Michelle believed the government was seeking to privatise more of the healthcare system. “They’re not going to come out and say it, but I do think they’re pushing people into private health insurance.” For many patients, “if they want their hip replacement when they need it, that’s the only option they’ve got.”

Stephanie (not her real name), who has been working as a nurse for four years, said more staff are needed “not just in the hospitals, but in the rest homes and GPs.” Nurses were constantly asked to do overtime due to staffing shortages, but Stephanie said she was too exhausted to do any.

Like many nurses, she had considered moving overseas to find better paying work, “but I’ve got a student loan, and they would put up my student loan.” New Zealand residents can get interest-free student loans, but anyone who leaves the country is required to pay interest.

“I feel sorry for the new graduates that are having to look overseas for work because they can’t find any here, and will have to pay interest,” Stephanie said. Hundreds of recent graduate nurses have not been offered jobs in New Zealand, despite the severe staffing shortages.

Stephanie was not optimistic that the government would change its position, adding that she expected there would be more strikes. “I’m hoping that we don’t cave in, that we keep going,” she said.

There is considerable determination to fight, and widespread public support for healthcare workers. The NZNO apparatus, however, has a long record of imposing sellout agreements. Following strikes in 2018 and 2021 during the last Labour Party-led government, the bureaucracy sought to wear down healthcare workers, and isolate them from other workers, in order to convince them that they had to accept a deal that failed to address living costs or the staffing crisis.

The fight for high-quality public health services, with decent wages and conditions, must be taken out of the hands of the union apparatus, which the government is relying upon to enforce its cuts. To break the isolation of their dispute, nurses need new organisations that they control: rank-and-file workplace committees. These will seek to broaden the struggle against austerity to all sections of the working class.

Such a struggle must be based on socialist policies, in opposition to the pro-business agenda that is upheld by the National government, the opposition Labour Party and all their allies. Workers should reject the lie that there is not enough money to properly fund the health system. The money to provide for all human needs must be obtained through the redistribution of wealth from the super-rich, and the ending of spending on militarism and war.



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