

'Be fair to those who care': New Zealand hospitals in chaos as 30,000 nurses strike

Monday 16 July 2018, by [AINGE ROY Eleanor](#) (Date first published: 12 July 2018).

First such action in 30 years comes after what acting PM Winston Peters called nine years of neglect by previous government

Hospitals in [New Zealand](#) have cancelled elective surgeries and discharged patients early after 30,000 nurses walked off the job in the first such nationwide strike in 30 years.

The 24-hour strike began on Thursday, and comes after months of negotiations between the government and nurses broke down on Wednesday, leaving hospitals to battle winter illnesses without crucial staff. Long delays at hospital emergency departments are expected around the country.

Striking nurses held rallies in major cities, chanting "be fair to those who care" in the largest public demonstrations by the health sector ever seen on the country's streets.

Nurses said they were overworked and underpaid, with unsafe working conditions leading to burnout and exhaustion. Patient care and staff wellbeing were routinely compromised, they said.

Acting prime minister Winston Peters said the government was "very, very disappointed" that its latest offer of a 12.5% increase had been rejected, and that it would take time to address nine years of neglect under the previous National government.

Although the May budget delivered a surplus, Peters said the extra funds were needed to handle unforeseen spending, [such as managing the spread of mycoplasma bovis](#), a cow disease.

"We are saying give us some time ... it's not that we're not willing to, we haven't got the money," said Peters. "We've gone as far as we can go as a government. We got hold of a negotiated arrangement which we inherited - the nurses have had a raw nine years."

The government offered a pay-rise pot of more than half a billion dollars, as well as promising to hire hundreds more nurses around the country.

Members of the New Zealand Nurses Organisation want pay rises of between 12.5% and 15.9%, to be rolled out in just over two years.

Five thousand nurses remained on the job on Thursday to keep hospitals operating and patients safe, and there are special provisions in place in case of a natural disaster or major health emergency.

In an opinion piece for Stuff, Wellington nurse Erin Kennedy said nurses turn up to work everyday unsure whether they would be able to look after their patients or themselves. "Ten years of underfunding have left our hospitals in such a state that patients and nurses are, more often than

not, unsafe," [Kennedy wrote](#). "Chances are there will not be time to properly read every patient's notes, or ensure that all patient needs are met."

The opposition National party's health spokesman, Michael Woodhouse, said the Labour coalition government had raised workers' expectations too high, too fast, with their election campaign hinging on the promise to improve the quality of life for everyday Kiwis.

"The effect of this strike on patients and the wider health sector will be extremely significant," said Woodhouse. "The nurses were also frustrated that the government entered the facilitation process saying 'that's all the money there is' and this is the effect of it. This move did not reflect good-faith bargaining and it is now unclear how the situation will be resolved ... the government has completely lost control of the process due to its mishandling."

Heated discussions have erupted on social media platforms, debating whether strike action was justified, or putting lives at risk.

Primary school teachers are also planning a nationwide strike on 15 August, demanding a 16% pay rise. In the past two months [bus drivers, cinema workers and fast-food workers have also staged industrial action](#).

On Monday 4,000 employees at Inland Revenue and the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment stopped work for two hours, demanding better pay.

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