

Union shuts down Victorian nurses campaign

Peter Byrne, Socialist Equality Party senate candidate for Victoria
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The decision by the Australian Nursing Federation (ANF) to lift industrial bans by Victorian nurses and accept an 11th hour pay offer has removed a potentially embarrassing issue for the Labor party from the federal election campaign.

While federal opposition leader Kevin Rudd claims to oppose the Howard government's WorkChoices legislation, the state Labor government in Victoria was using its punitive provisions against nurses fighting for better pay and conditions. The longer the dispute went on, the more it highlighted the fact that there are no fundamental differences between Labor and the Coalition on industrial relations policy.

At the mass meeting on October 25, the ANF leaders presented the deal with the state government as a great win. A large contingent of officials from the building, police, teachers, ambulance and other unions stood outside the hall, chanting "Nurses united will never be defeated". In this celebratory atmosphere, ANF state secretary Lisa Fitzpatrick declared to the 4,000 assembled nurses that they had scored a victory and that the union had achieved most of its demands.

The truth is rather different. The ANF imposed work bans in public hospitals on October 16 after almost eight months of fruitless negotiations with the state government over a new wage agreement. Victoria's 30,000 public sector nurses, who are among the lowest paid in Australia, overwhelmingly supported the campaign for a 6 percent annual pay increase over three years and improved nurse/patient staffing ratios to improve conditions in the severely under-funded public health sector.

Under the new agreement, however, nurses will only receive increases ranging between 3.6 percent and 6.1 percent every year for the next four years—well below cost-of-living rises—and tied to a series of productivity gains still being negotiated by the union. The government had previously offered an annual rise of 3.25 percent over five years.

The state government dropped its demand for a free hand on nurse-patient ratios and promised an extra 500 nursing staff in post- and ante-natal areas, emergency, and other departments. But the productivity arrangement requires that nurses treat an extra 377,000 emergency patients and provide an additional 16,000 elective surgeries over the four-year agreement.

The productivity targets cannot possibly be met just by employing an extra 500 nurses, who in any case will not be hired until May 2008. In fact, nurses will be expected to

increase their already heavy workloads and the huge strain on public hospitals will continue. Last year an additional 55,000 patients attended public hospital emergency departments, and there were almost 39,000 people on the state's elective surgery waiting lists.

The agreement allows management greater flexibility in rostering staff, including the introduction of split shifts. Mental health, Royal District Nursing Service and Red Cross Blood Service nurses, who were involved in the campaign, were not included in the deal and are the subject of separate negotiations.

In his press release, Victorian Health Minister Daniel Andrews made clear that he regarded the deal with the ANF as a win for the government. He said it was consistent with the government's wage policy of an annual rise of 3.25 percent. The agreement, he said, "delivers greater productivity and more flexible nurse-to-patient ratios", adding that the union was required to "work with the government to improve performance".

In the course of the dispute, Labor premier John Brumby threatened the nurses, declaring that their bans were "unlawful" and that they would be fined up to \$6,000 each under the WorkChoices legislation. Federal Labor's shadow minister for industrial relations, Julia Gillard, stressed that an incoming Rudd government would regard any future statewide industrial action by nurses as illegal and liable to prosecution.

The state Labor government did not hesitate to use WorkChoices to dock the pay of some 12,000 nurses, even though nursing staff kept 3 out of 4 beds operational throughout the dispute. Many lost more than one weeks' salary, while others had their pay cut for refusing to admit patients—including in areas not affected by work bans but which suffered staff shortages due to a gastro outbreak.

A number of nurses attending funerals or on study leave also had their pay cut, along with some who were retrospectively deemed by management to be taking industrial action. Nurses working in areas where doctors or surgeons decided not to admit patients for elective surgery were affected as well.

The Labor government and health department management's attempts to intimidate the nurses by docking their pay and threatening fines began provoking angry calls for all-out strike action—the last thing the union or the Labor party were prepared to countenance in the midst of a federal election campaign.

The ANF, with the assistance of Australian Council of Trade

Unions president Sharan Burrow, moved to shut down the campaign. No effort was made to link up with other sections of workers fighting for pay rises, including Tasmanian nurses who were also engaged in a campaign for higher wages. Behind the scenes, a deal was rapidly stitched up.

Nurses were clearly angered by the Labor government's invocation of WorkChoices penalties. In the motion presented to the mass meeting, the ANF leadership expressed "dismay" over the Labor government's "zealous utilisation" of the legislation. But at no stage did the union have any intention of waging a political campaign to expose the duplicity of Labor over the issue.

Like the rest of the trade union bureaucracy, the ANF is campaigning for a Labor victory in the federal elections, claiming it will be "a lesser evil" than Howard and the Coalition. In reality, Labor's proposals on industrial relations are as draconian as Howard's WorkChoices. They allow individual contracts, the outlawing of many forms of industrial action, and the sanctioning of summary dismissal. This was the dirty secret that the ANF and the unions decided to keep hidden.

Moreover, the agreement will only further undermine the public hospital system. A day before the October 25 mass meeting, the Australian Medical Association (AMA) released its *Public Hospital Report Card 2007*, which is a damning indictment of the record of the state and federal governments—both Labor and Coalition.

The report reveals that in the last 20 years public hospital bed numbers have been slashed by 60 percent. The hospitals are run above the safe capacity level of 85 percent for much of the time and large teaching hospitals are operating at average capacity levels of 95 percent, well above safe levels. Less than two-thirds of patients brought to emergency departments are seen in acceptable times.

The AMA report punctures the claims of Victorian Health Minister Andrews that the state's hospitals "are the best in Australia". The report points out that Victoria has the lowest level of public health spending in the country—only \$588 per person, compared with \$665 nationally and \$1,407 in the Northern Territory. The AMA has called on Labor and the Coalition to pledge an extra \$3 billion in federal health spending next year, but neither party has committed to this amount.

The nurses' dispute demonstrates that in order to defend wages and conditions, and the quality public health service required in the twenty-first century, nurses need a new political perspective. This requires a political break from the Labor and trade union bureaucracies and the fight for a socialist perspective. The Socialist Equality Party is standing candidates in the federal election and calling for the injection of billions of dollars into public health, enabling all working people to have access to free, first class health care.

Several nurses who attended the October 25 mass meeting

spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site*:

Clare Nicholls from the Austin Hospital said: "We're fighting for the future and for younger nurses. Nurses are frightened by the threats against them from management. Doctors, physiotherapists, everyone else supports the nurses. They know that we cannot safely look after 6 or 7 patients. Nursing is an essential service. You can't run it without enough staff. Imagine a fire brigade without enough firemen."

One nurse from Caulfield Hospital, who did not want to be named, said: "[Premier] Brumby has lost it with the nurses. We'll be voting elsewhere. On Saturday evening at our hospital one of the coordinators was harassing staff, yelling that they had 15 minutes to open the beds or else. They wouldn't get anybody else, then a patient fell and broke a humerus. In our ward there are a hundred stories like that."

Nicole, from Ballarat Hospital, told WSWS: "We're not just fighting for a pay rise. The government wants to cut the nurse/patient ratios that we have. They want flexibility. If someone is off sick they won't be replaced. We are already very busy now. It will endanger patients' lives. This is about patient care and safety. Patients have all been supportive saying things like 'You go girl!' The government doesn't value us much."

Beck Nelson-Smith from the Royal Children's Hospital said: "The labour wards [maternity suites] didn't get what they wanted, which was one on one [currently 2 midwives to 3 mothers]. The Labor government is using WorkChoices—the Liberals' initiative—against their people. It's criminal. I think that it is a disgrace. I don't know what is going on. I've been Labor all my life but I woke up this morning thinking what a predicament they're putting me in."

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