

Australia: Nurses continue industrial action in defiance of industrial laws

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More than 4,000 public hospital nurses in the state of Victoria yesterday held a mass meeting and unanimously voted to maintain their industrial campaign for better wages and conditions, defying a ban imposed by the federal Labor government's Fair Work Australia tribunal.

The nurses have closed a limited number of hospital beds since November 12. They are seeking an 18.5 percent wage rise over four years, and are fighting to prevent the state Liberal government from slashing hospital costs and undermining their already difficult working conditions. A state cabinet leak from May this year revealed that Premier Ted Baillieu's government aims to reduce spending by more than \$100 million by replacing qualified nurses with lower-paid and less-trained assistants, increasing "roster-shift flexibility" and dismantling the required ratio of one nurse to every four to six patients per ward.

Last Wednesday, the Fair Work Australia industrial judges ordered the nurses to suspend all industrial action for 90 days, falsely accusing them of threatening "the life, the personal safety or health, or the welfare, of the population or of part of it." Another edict ordering an end to the bed closures was issued last Friday.

In defying the tribunal's orders, the nurses confront the threat of having their wages docked as well as being hit with fines totalling thousands of dollars each. Under the draconian provisions of the Fair Work Act, drafted by Julia Gillard before she became prime minister, the nurses could also be imprisoned for up to 12 months. The Murdoch-owned *Herald Sun* has provocatively emphasised this prospect in its coverage of the dispute. Despite the threats, the nurses are determined to proceed with their campaign. During the mass meeting yesterday, the 4,000 nurses cheered when one declared

she was ready to go to jail if that was necessary.

The nurses' militancy reflects their resolve not to allow any further deterioration of the public health and hospital system and their anger over the aggressive campaign against them by the state Liberal government. Earlier this month it was revealed that the Victorian Hospitals Industrial Association had made extensive preparations for an unprecedented lockout of the nurses. The dispute is being closely followed in corporate circles as a key test case. It has been compared with last month's Qantas grounding and lockout, indicating the ability of Gillard's Fair Work regime to clamp down on any section of the working class seeking to defend jobs and conditions.

One nurse at the Alfred Hospital in Melbourne told the *World Socialist Web Site*: "What puts patients' lives at risk is having too many people to care for and having unskilled workers who can't contribute much to the workload." She continued: "The only thing nurses have as leverage is their labour, and if they're not able to withdraw their labour, we can't do anything to get adequate conditions and provide good care. The FWA [Fair Work Australia] criterion with the nurses is 'putting patients' lives at risk.' But at any one time we might have beds closed because we don't have enough staff to look after those patients. The other criterion is the 'economic damage,' which they used at Qantas—but they can say anything damages the economy."

Another nurse with 30 years' experience explained: "The changes I've seen have all been for the worse. There are increased demands. Even with the one-to-four ratio, the degree of care is variable. Now the state government is trying to take the professional nurse out of the hospital and put in place much cheaper labour. Many will leave if the ratio goes. People have had

enough. The graduates don't want to go to particular hospitals [and] we hear so many stories about the declining quality of care." She added: "Fair Work Australia is to bring in everything the government wants. That's what it's for."

The state Liberal government furiously denounced the nurses' defiance of Fair Work Australia. Yesterday Health Minister David Davis threatened: "We will take whatever action is required."

Nurses confront a political struggle against both the state Liberal government and the federal Labor government. In response to the global economic crisis, the Gillard government—in line with its counterparts in Europe, the United States and internationally—is seeking to impose the burden on working people through an austerity agenda involving sweeping spending cuts, especially to public health care.

The Australian Nurses Federation (ANF) is striving to prevent any challenge to the Labor government and its industrial relations regime. The ANF leadership has endorsed the continued "illegal" industrial action in order to retain some credibility before its members. At the same time, the union aims to use the bed closures to pressure the state Liberal government to cut a deal on a new four-year enterprise bargaining agreement that contains various cost-cutting measures and "productivity" savings, but which retains at least in some form the nurse-patient ratio provisions.

Just prior to the ban on the nurses' industrial action, the ANF extended what its state secretary Lisa Fitzpatrick called an "olive branch" to the state government, offering to end all industrial action and send the dispute to consent arbitration before FWA. This process, unlike compulsory arbitration, could lead to a ruling on staffing issues such as nurse-patient ratios. Any such arbitration—which the ANF has pledged to respect as the verdict of the so-called independent umpire—would nevertheless be entirely in line with the pro-business agenda of the Fair Work tribunal.

On Sunday, ANF assistant secretary Paul Gilbert told the *Age* what he feared could emerge in the mass meeting: "We will be confronted with a group of people some of whom want to do nothing and some who want to go on strike. Worst case scenario tomorrow [is] there will be a substantial number of people ... who want to go on strike."

This remark exposes the union's calculations in the dispute—and underscores the fraud of the middle class pseudo-lefts' glorification of the ANF bureaucracy. A comment on the nurses' struggle published by Socialist Alternative declared that the ANF "has done what every other union in the country should do—ignore Fair Work Australia and get on with fighting for workers' rights." The group added that the union had "delivered a slap in the face to a government intent on smashing the conditions of nurses, and a slap in the face to the unjust Fair Work laws." In reality, the ANF bureaucracy is desperately seeking maintain its grip over the nurses as it prepares to cut a sell-out deal with the government to end the dispute.

Nurses must make a conscious break from the ANF and form their own independent, rank-and-file committees in every hospital and health service. The ANF has systematically isolated nurses from linking their struggle with other sections of workers, such as mental health and public service, now engaged in industrial action. Nurses need to turn out to other sections of the working class confronting similar attacks on their wages and conditions, including health workers throughout the country and other public sector workers. A new political perspective is required, based on the overthrow of the profit system. The alternative to capitalism is socialism, which would involve confiscating the banks and private health and medical conglomerates and placing them under the democratic control of the working class.



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