

# Australia: The political issues facing Victorian nurses

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Tens of thousands of public hospital nurses in Victoria confront an assault on their jobs, wages and conditions that is being coordinated between the state Liberal government of Premier Ted Baillieu and the federal Labor government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard. In their determined campaign to protect their interests and defend the public health system, nurses have defied Gillard's draconian Fair Work Australia legislation, risking docked wages, large fines and even imprisonment for 12 months.

Around the world, governments are moving to slash healthcare spending. The economic restructuring agenda now being advanced in the US and Europe, following the 2008 financial crash and bailout of the banks, aims at eliminating basic social services and entitlements, with public healthcare systems a prime target. In Australia, the Labor government has made little secret that the overriding aim of its attempted federal takeover of Australia's hospitals, and national extension of Victoria's regressive "casemix" funding model, is to reduce long-term spending.

Nurses in Victoria are at the forefront of a related cost-cutting offensive by the state Liberal government. Premier Baillieu is seeking to cut the state's debt levels by imposing an annual wage ceiling of just 2.5 percent on all public sector workers—the nurses as well as teachers, public servants, mental health workers, paramedics and others who are negotiating new enterprise bargaining agreements. The 2.5 percent offer amounts to a significant real wage cut, with official annual cost of living increases now 4.5 percent. Nurses are demanding an 18.5 percent wage rise over four years.

The state government wants to slash hospital spending by more than \$100 million via various "productivity" measures. These include replacing nurses with less-trained and lower-paid "nursing assistants," imposing greater "roster-shift flexibility" to force nurses to work split shifts of several hours in the morning and several more later in the day with a

long unpaid break in between, and abolishing nurse-patient ratio provisions.

The nurse-patient ratio rules require that there must be one nurse for every four patients during day shifts in acute hospitals. The provisos were introduced 11 years ago on the orders of the Industrial Relations Commission, which arbitrated an agreement between the Australian Nursing Federation (ANF) and the then state Labor government of Steve Bracks. The ruling forced the state government to hire a significant number of new nurses—which is why the ratio has been under attack ever since. The previous Labor government triggered several clashes with the nurses when it attempted to undo the measure.

The Baillieu Liberal government is now determined to succeed where its predecessor failed. Its secret, detailed plan for an unprecedented lockout in the hospitals—leaked to the media earlier this month—underscores what is at stake.

Both Baillieu and Gillard are under enormous pressure from big business and finance capital, which regard the nurses' dispute as a key test case. It follows the decision by Qantas management to shut down the airline's operations and lock out all staff. To back Qantas's restructuring strategy, the Gillard government obtained a Fair Work Australia (FWA) tribunal ruling ending all industrial action. The airline unions promptly complied.

The Victorian government secured a similar FWA ruling last week suspending all industrial action for 90 days, but nurses continued their industrial bans. At a mass meeting on Monday, they voted unanimously to maintain them. The nurses' defiance has provoked outrage from the state government and the media.

An editorial in the *Age* published November 18 declared: "The nurses should have respected, not rejected, the Fair Work order... Playing fair by Fair Work Australia is the only

way to go.” It added nervously: “Imagine the chaos and outrage if Qantas and the three unions involved in the airline’s industrial row had ignored Fair Work Australia’s termination ruling and continued their dispute.”

Neither the state Liberal nor federal Labor government is prepared to allow the nurses to openly flout a FWA edict and establish a precedent that other workers will seek to emulate as they defend their wages and conditions.

No one should succumb to the illusion that Australian Nursing Federation leaders, having gone along with the mass meeting decision to continue the bans, will wage a political fight. On the contrary, as their record demonstrates, they will seek a rotten deal with the Liberal government as soon as possible.

The union has at every step sought to reach an agreement with the Baillieu government, delivering on its demands for “productivity” expenditure cuts. Just before Fair Work Australia issued the 90-day suspension order on November 16, the ANF offered the government an “olive branch” of an immediate end to all industrial action in return for agreement on consented arbitration. This would involve allowing every aspect of a new enterprise agreement to be determined by FWA—the very body that has sought to quash the nurses’ industrial campaign—potentially resulting in the erosion or abolition of the nurse-patient ratio.

ANF state secretary Lisa Fitzpatrick complained: “Every step of the way [the] ANF has negotiated in good faith, we’ve given ground to accommodate the employers’ claims and we’ve refined our claims.” Before last Monday’s mass meeting of nurses, the union’s assistant secretary Paul Gilbert told the *Age* that the “worst case scenario” would be confronting a “substantial number of people who want to go on strike.”

The union has only endorsed the “illegal” industrial action in order to maintain its credibility among nurses, and as a means of pressuring the Baillieu government to accept its “olive branch.”

The ANF has presided over the steady deterioration of conditions in Victoria’s public hospitals and rammed through successive enterprise agreements that have left the state’s nurses the poorest paid in the country. In seeking to advance their campaign and wage a struggle against the state Liberal and federal Labor governments, the nurses’ primary obstacle is the union. What is required is the formation of independent organisations of struggle, such as rank and file

committees, in every hospital and health facility, independently of and in opposition to the ANF.

Nurses have to turn out to other sections of the working class confronting similar attacks, beginning with the other Victorian public sector workers, and with nurses and other health workers throughout Australia. Such a campaign, based on an appeal to the entire working class in defence of the public health system, would strike a powerful chord.

Above all, what is required is a conscious political break with the pro-business Labor Party and its various props, including the Greens. A new perspective is required, based on a recognition that the profit system is incompatible with properly resourced and rationally operated public healthcare system.

Nurses and other health workers undertake years of education and training in order to assist patients, yet at every step, their ability to function is compromised by chronic understaffing, lack of resources and union-imposed “productivity” concessions.

Healthcare must be recognised as a basic social right. The best available treatment must be provided to all who need it, free of charge, while all those working in the health system must be provided with the resources required to function at the highest possible level, and paid a decent living wage for themselves and their families.

This all requires the working class taking up the fight to build a party that represents its interests, based on a socialist and internationalist program, working to reorganise society in the interests of the vast majority, not the wealthy few. This is the perspective advanced by the Socialist Equality Party.



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