

# Australia: Union shuts down nurses' industrial action

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The Australian Nursing Federation (ANF) last night ordered an immediate end to all industrial action by nurses in the state of Victoria, following the issuing of a third edict from the Fair Work Australia tribunal prohibiting bed closures and industrial action. The trade union's decision represents an abject capitulation to the federal Labor government's industrial relations regime and the state Liberal government's agenda of slashing costs by eliminating nurse-patient staffing ratios and tearing up other workplace protections in the state's public hospitals.

As the ANF website statement makes clear, the state government has made no concessions whatsoever. The ANF leaders had offered to enter "a compromise form of arbitration," but Premier Ted Baillieu insisted that all industrial action had to be ended before any proposal could be considered. ANF state secretary Lisa Fitzpatrick simply reported: "Today I have decided to give him that opportunity."

The union is determined to have FWA rule on nurses' wages and conditions and has issued an absolute guarantee that it will uphold any arbitrated outcome, even if it involves the undermining of working conditions. Baillieu has so far refused to go along with this, apparently determined not to leave any possibility open that the nurse-patient ratios and other measures will remain in place. He wants to force the dispute into "compulsory arbitration" within FWA, which cannot determine staffing arrangements in a new enterprise agreement, thereby ensuring the end of the nurse-patient ratios.

The ANF bureaucracy's decision to enforce the Fair Work Australia directive is in blatant violation of a

resolution unanimously passed at a mass meeting of nurses on Monday. Nurses had voted to maintain their industrial campaign, in defiance of a FWA ban, until the state government made a satisfactory offer for a new enterprise agreement. One nurse won loud cheers when she told the meeting that she was willing to go to jail if that proved necessary. Under the industrial laws of Prime Minister Julia Gillard's Labor government, "illegal" action is punishable by heavy fines and up to 12 months' imprisonment.

In her website statement ANF secretary Fitzpatrick declared: "I know many of you may be confused, upset and disappointed by this decision—I ask that you have trust in the ANF, its Council and staff." She was clearly nervous about the nurses' reaction to the union's betrayal of their campaign.

Nurses have repeatedly expressed their determination to resist the state government's demands. It aims to impose a significant real wage cut on the nurses, abolish nurse-patient ratios, introduce lower-paid nursing assistants into nursing roles, and implement greater roster-shift "flexibility" arrangements, including "split shifts," which break nurses' working day in two. Nurses have explained that these measures would lead to the further deterioration of the already overstretched and under-resourced public hospital system and trigger a mass exodus of nurses out of the profession.

While nurses were prepared to defy the FWA's edicts, the ANF leadership was never prepared to wage a political struggle against the Gillard government and its FWA apparatus. As soon as the FWA issued an unambiguous order to end all industrial action

yesterday, the ANF immediately fell into line. The reason for the ANF's capitulation was not a lack of support, but exactly the reverse.

The industrial campaign has been shut down precisely at the point where it was attracting significant support from other sections of workers. Up to ten thousand people attended a mass rally organised by the ANF on Thursday in central Melbourne, including nurses, their family members and other sections of public sector workers also confronting demands by the state government for real wage cuts. Letters and comments to the newspapers indicate even broader public support.

Far from being the starting point for an offensive against the state government and the industrial straitjacket of the FWA legislation, the ANF leadership called the rally as it was preparing to shut down the campaign. It was joined on stage by the leader of the state Labor opposition Daniel Andrews, who as health minister in a previous Labor government had spearheaded a drive to abolish nurse-patient ratios and threatened nurses with massive fines for taking industrial action.

The line-up of Labor and union bureaucrats at the rally was not to support nurses, but to back the ANF bureaucracy as it got ready to shut down the campaign. The decision underlines the role of the unions as the industrial police for governments state and federal. They are enforcing the relentless restructuring drive to slash wages and conditions to meet the demands of finance capital for "fiscal responsibility."

The ANF's sell-out is also a graphic exposure of the role of various pseudo-radical outfits, such as Socialist Alliance and Socialist Alternative, which have shamelessly promoted illusions among nurses that the ANF was fighting to defend their interests.

Nurses are now posed point blank with the stark reality that it is not possible to wage a struggle to defend their jobs, wages and conditions within the confines of the ANF. As the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) urged in its statement on Wednesday: "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 must 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."

Such a campaign would necessarily involve a political struggle against the Gillard Labor government and its FWA legislation, as well as the state government in Victoria. That can be waged only on the basis of a socialist perspective to reorganise society to meet the pressing needs of working people, rather than the profits of a tiny wealthy elite. Above all, it necessitates the fight for a workers' government to implement socialist policies, including for free, high quality health care.

We urge nurses wanting to discuss this perspective to contact the SEP and the *World Socialist Web Site*.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**