

The Australian trade unions and the betrayal of the Victorian nurses' struggle

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The Australian Nursing Federation's shutdown of the industrial campaign waged by public hospital nurses and midwives in Victoria stands as a warning to the entire working class. Coming after the bitter experience of the Qantas fleet grounding—and subsequent trade union compliance with an official four-year ban on all industrial action within the airline—the betrayal of the nurses' struggle underscores the critical role of the unions in enforcing the budget cuts and other regressive, pro-business measures being advanced by the federal Labor government in collaboration with its state counterparts.

Public sector workers internationally are at the forefront of the sweeping restructuring of economic and social relations that is being advanced by the ruling elite in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crash. Mass layoffs and savage wage cuts are being imposed on public sector workers throughout Europe and the US, while those in the health sector are further affected by the accelerating privatisation of healthcare and gutting of publicly provided services.

The nurses in Victoria confront the same processes. The previous state Labor government utilised the eruption of the global economic crisis to impose a 2.5 percent wage ceiling on all public sector workers, and this has simply been maintained by the Liberal Party, which took office last year. Liberal Premier Ted Baillieu is now determined to push through this substantial real wage cut on the nurses, while also cutting hospital spending by abolishing the existing nurse-patient staffing ratio requirements, replacing nurses with lower-paid “nursing assistants”, and imposing new split shifts that involve nurses taking long unpaid breaks between two blocks of working hours.

These measures form part of the premier's drive to satisfy the demand of financial markets for budget

surpluses and lower state debt. Earlier this month, credit ratings agency Standard & Poor's affirmed Victoria's “AAA” status, but warned that this reflected confidence in the government's “commitment to fiscal prudence” and that any “change in government policy” could trigger a downgrade.

The nurses have repeatedly demonstrated their determination to fight, defying multiple edicts from Fair Work Australia (FWA) banning their industrial action and threatening them with large fines and imprisonment for up to 12 months. Yet at every step, they have been stymied by the Australian Nursing Federation (ANF). The union's anti-democratic decision to halt the limited bed closures—in defiance of a unanimous resolution adopted by a mass meeting of nurses and without a single concession offered by the state government in return—was a rank betrayal. It signals the bureaucracy's determination to reach a behind-the-scenes deal with Baillieu that delivers on the government's central demands against the nurses.

The industrial campaign was shut down precisely at the point where it was winning wider support from other public sector workers and from ordinary people more broadly. The unions were confronted with the spectre of a movement unifying different sections of the working class in a confrontation with the federal Labor government. That could not be countenanced by the ANF.

Throughout the nurses' campaign, the union has sought to cover up the critical issues confronting nurses. The ANF bureaucracy has remained silent on the role being played by Prime Minister Julia Gillard and her government's draconian FWA legislation.

At the same time, the ANF it is seeking to divert the

nurses' struggle into an electoral campaign for a Labor Party win at the next state poll—due in 2014. Since shutting down the nurses' industrial action, the ANF has encouraged nurses to stage protests and distribute flyers to the public in marginal electorates held by Liberal Party parliamentarians.

The union is also promoting state Labor opposition leader Daniel Andrews. In 2007, Andrews served as health minister and attempted to abolish the nurse-patient ratio and undermine other conditions by utilising the Howard government's Work Choices industrial laws against the nurses. He personally denounced the nurses for taking "unnecessary" and "illegal" industrial action and accused them of "compromising the care of hundreds and thousands of patients right across our state." Yet last week the ANF welcomed him at a rally of nurses, where he cynically declared he stood "shoulder to shoulder" with them against the Baillieu government.

The role of the ANF in the nurses' struggle underscores the impossibility of any section of workers waging a successful struggle in defence of their class interests within the framework of the trade unions. The unions are playing a critical role in partnership with the federal Labor government in enforcing the restructuring measures demanded by big business and finance capital against workers' wages, jobs, and conditions. Gillard's stated aim of orchestrating an economy-wide "transition" driven by the mining boom is centrally directed towards lowering the living standards of workers to the benchmark set by the Asian low-wage manufacturing platforms. The unions are spearheading this agenda—enforcing mass layoffs at companies such as BlueScope Steel and facilitating the offshoring of operations at Qantas and other firms.

The first step in the working class mounting its own counter-offensive is to make a decisive break with the trade unions and develop new organisations of struggle, including rank-and-file workplace committees. They must turn to other sections of workers facing similar attacks on their wages and conditions—beginning with healthcare and other public sector workers throughout the country. The nurses should convert the overwhelming public sympathy they enjoy into a unified industrial and political campaign against the Baillieu and Gillard governments.

A conscious break must be made with the pro-business

Labor Party and its various props, including the Greens and the pseudo-left organisations. The misnamed Socialist Alternative and Socialist Alliance have done everything within their power to provide the ANF bureaucracy with some "left" cover while working against the nurses. Socialist Alternative declared the ANF's actions demonstrated the great potential of "class-struggle unionism." Socialist Alliance has backed the union's shutdown of the nurses' industrial campaign by promoting the views of one nurse who declared that the "union is playing it smart" and "has been amazing in its ability to respond so quickly and effectively to all the legal tricks pulled by this lousy government."

Working every day in the public hospital system, nurses confront the destructive consequences of an irrationally-organised, profit-driven healthcare model. The profession has no shortage of highly trained, self-sacrificing, and caring people—yet the ability of nurses to properly utilise their skills and to treat their patients with the necessary care and dignity is hampered at every turn by the deliberate under-resourcing and under-staffing of the public healthcare system. Securing decent working conditions for all healthcare professionals is an essential part of the fight to establish as a basic social right the provision of high quality, freely accessible medical treatment for all in need. This is a revolutionary question, requiring the fight for a workers' government to completely reorganise social and economic relations on a socialist basis, advancing the social needs of the working class against the profit interests of the wealthy minority. This is the perspective advanced by the Socialist Equality Party.



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