

An exchange on the union's role in the Australian nurses' dispute

Patrick O'Connor
30 November 2011

The *World Socialist Web Site* received the following letter from a nurse in response to an article published November 22, "Nurses continue industrial action in defiance of industrial laws"):

I disagree strongly with your author's assertions that the ANF's pet project has been to dismantle public health and sell-out nurses. As a long-time registered nurse and union member, I see that it has been imperative that we have a representative body, a peak professional organisation representing and defending professional nursing practice today. I think the union has not been militant to date but rather assertive in that the primary aim of nursing has always been to safely care for patients. Most of my colleagues believe that pay is a related issue but comes next after the safe delivery of care. Nurses are responsible for real lives. There is strong support for the union and the politics of care will continue to inform debates about managing health care dollars. I think it very unlikely that nurses will stop nursing to form local, hospital based collectives. We haven't got the spare time when lives are on the line. The current situation of a rapid escalation to unprotected industrial action is the fault of the Liberal Government. We just want to nurse safely with recognition of our efforts, our accountability and our right to professional self-determination. This is the theme of our EBA [enterprise bargaining agreement] claim.

K

Dear K,

Thank you for your letter to the *World Socialist Web Site*. The sentiments expressed reflect the current thinking of a wide layer of nurses who are determined to fight against cuts to staffing numbers and public hospital funding, but do not yet understand the key role being played by the Australian Nursing Federation in facilitating this agenda.

The Victorian state Liberal government of Premier Ted Baillieu is utilising the Fair Work Australia industrial laws of the federal Labor government to wage an offensive against public sector nurses. It aims to impose a four-year agreement involving a real wage cut and a range of "productivity" spending cuts, including

the introduction of lower-paid assistants to replace nurses, the creation of new "flexible" split shifts and, above all, the abolition of mandatory nurse-patient staffing ratios.

Victoria is the only state in Australia to have these ratios. Ordinary nurses, already overstretched and under-resourced, expect the abolition of the provision to result in their workloads being increased to utterly untenable levels. For the government, on the other hand, the nurse-patient ratios are regarded as an unacceptable impediment to its ability to lay off hospital staff and cut costs as it deems necessary. The *Australian Financial Review* and Victorian Employers' Chamber of Commerce and Industry (VECCI) have both compared the dispute with the drive by Qantas management to shift the airline's operations to cheap labour platforms in Asia. VECCI declared last week that the nurses' struggle "may be the best illustration" of "managers losing the ability to restructure their businesses within existing workplace laws as they see fit."

The nurses' struggle is not an "ordinary" negotiation for a new enterprise agreement—it is a key test case for the corporate elite's drive to implement restructuring measures throughout the economy at the expense of working people's living conditions. The Labor government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard is playing an instrumental role. While maintaining a public silence on the nurses' dispute, it is no doubt following developments extremely closely. Labor's draconian Fair Work industrial laws have been used by the Victorian Liberal government to make preparations for an unprecedented lockout in the hospitals and then to ban the nurses' industrial action.

In this context, how has the Australian Nursing Federation responded? You write, "I think the union has not been militant to date but rather assertive in that the primary aim of nursing has always been to safely care for patients."

To put it bluntly, the only assertiveness demonstrated by the ANF bureaucracy has been in shutting down the nurses' industrial campaign.

Since you wrote your letter, the union has contemptuously defied the unanimous decision of the nurses, at a mass meeting, to maintain their limited bed closures in defiance of the Fair Work

Australia ban. Nurses resolved to continue their campaign, despite facing the threat of large fines and up to 12 months' imprisonment. Last Friday, however, only four days after this mass meeting, the ANF unilaterally declared that nurses must cease all industrial action, following the issuing of a third edict by the Labor government's industrial tribunal.

The ANF state secretary, Lisa Fitzpatrick, has since followed up this betrayal by announcing that the union was postponing for two days the next mass meeting that had been scheduled for today. Behind-closed-doors negotiations between the ANF and the government are continuing under the auspices of Fair Work Australia, and the union bureaucracy is clearly desperate to reach an agreement before convening a meeting of nurses to present them with a *fait accompli*.

Throughout the nurses' struggle, the ANF has striven to cover up the role played by the Gillard government and the Labor Party. The union is now attempting to divert the nurses behind an electoral campaign for a Labor victory at the next state poll—which will not be held for another three years. The ANF's contempt for its membership was on display at the rally involving thousands of nurses in central Melbourne last Thursday, when state Labor leader Daniel Andrews was given the platform. In 2007, Andrews served as health minister in the previous Labor government and personally threatened nurses with the Howard government's Work Choices industrial laws as part of his unsuccessful drive to abolish the nurse-patient ratios. Now the ANF bureaucracy promotes as good coin his claim to be standing "shoulder to shoulder" with the nurses.

You write of the importance of nurses having a "representative body, a peak professional organisation representing and defending professional nursing practice today." Such an organisation is certainly required, but you are mistaken in believing that the ANF is carrying out that function. Like many workers, you have not yet recognised the profound transformation that has taken place in the role of the unions over the past two decades.

No longer workers' organisations in any sense, the trade unions internationally now derive their considerable material privileges from collaborating with business and government in imposing productivity speedups, job losses and wage cuts, all justified in the name of boosting the "international competitiveness" of the given national economy. The unions have played an essential role in ramming through the vicious austerity measures in Europe and the US that are aimed at permanently lowering the living standards of the working class. In Australia, the unions are closely collaborating with the federal Labor government in advancing sweeping economic restructuring measures. The bureaucracy has recently enforced the smelter shutdown and mass layoffs at BlueScope Steel and shut down the industrial campaign in defence of jobs at Qantas, and is now paving the way for a defeat of the nurses' struggle in Victoria.

You suggest that our call for nurses to develop new and

independent organisations to advance their interests, including rank and file committees in every hospital, is "very unlikely" because, "We haven't got the spare time when lives are on the line." In reality, the primary barrier to the formation of rank and file committees is not the enormous pressures that nurses confront in the hospitals but rather the absence of a clear political understanding among nurses about what they are confronting.

You write: "We just want to nurse safely with recognition of our efforts, our accountability and our right to professional self-determination." We agree entirely. This is a modest and reasonable demand but one that is incompatible with the austerity agenda being imposed by the Baillieu and Gillard governments, and their counterparts around the world. Public healthcare systems internationally are being systematically dismantled as part of the social counterrevolution being waged against the working class. Nurses want to work within a system that allows them to treat their patients with the necessary care and dignity, developing their professional skills and capacities in the process. But those demands can be met only through a complete reorganisation of society from top to bottom.

The economy must be rationally and democratically operated on the basis of satisfying social need, not private profit. High quality and freely accessible healthcare—provided by decently remunerated and properly resourced healthcare workers—must be recognised as a basic social right. To implement such measures requires a political fight by nurses and the working class as a whole for a workers' government and a socialist program. This is the perspective advanced by the Socialist Equality Party and our sister parties internationally, and which guides the analysis presented on the *World Socialist Web Site* of the nurses' struggle.

Yours fraternally,

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