

Australia: Nurses' union announces sham "community campaign"

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The Australian Nursing Federation (ANF) used a mass meeting that was attended by about 2,500 nurses in Melbourne yesterday to accelerate its wind-down of the nurses' campaign against a government attack on their wages and working conditions. The union ruled out any form of industrial action, instead announcing that a series of so-called community rallies will be staged outside hospitals in the next three weeks. These events are deliberately being used as a diversion, aimed at wearing down and demoralising nurses and paving the way for a union-brokered sellout agreement.

The previous mass meeting, held November 28, saw more than 4,000 nurses vote to maintain their industrial action, involving targeted hospital bed closures, in defiance of a ban imposed by the federal Labor government's Fair Work Australia industrial relations regime. This decision was made despite nurses being threatened with large fines and imprisonment. The ANF, however, undemocratically overturned the nurses' resolution just four days later and instructed them to cease all industrial action, without the state Liberal government making any concessions whatsoever.

Premier Ted Baillieu is determined to abolish or emasculate the existing mandatory staffing ratios. The government is also demanding the introduction of low-paid and less trained nursing assistants into nursing roles, and the implementation of new split-shift "flexibility" rosters. The government refuses any wage rise exceeding its public sector wages policy ceiling of 2.5 percent per annum, a significant real pay cut.

The government has made clear its unwillingness to compromise on any of these demands. This has posed the urgent need for nurses to mount a political and industrial struggle—uniting with other workers facing similar attacks, especially in the public sector and

health industry—against both the state and federal governments. The ANF is determined to block the emergence of such a movement, which is why it has so ruthlessly moved to quash any industrial action not sanctioned by Labor's Fair Work Australia (FWA) laws.

Announcing the plan for "community rallies" yesterday, ANF State Secretary Lisa Fitzpatrick openly acknowledged their central propose. "They [the nurses] will be taking their protest to their workplaces," she told the media, "and we'll be having community rallies in our lunch break, to make sure that there is no industrial action that is being taken around the state."

Community rallies are a tried and tested method employed by the trade union bureaucracy to wind down workers' industrial campaigns. The ANF told the nurses that the events would build community support for their struggle with the government—but the nurses already enjoy overwhelming public support. The task remains to mobilise this support into a political and industrial campaign uniting different sections of workers.

The nurses' union also insists that to take unlawful industrial action would be playing into Baillieu's hands, "taking the bait", because it would trigger forced arbitration by Fair Work Australia that would see nurse-patient ratios abolished. This position underscores the ANF's abject subservience to the FWA industrial edifice. A fight against Labor's laws, defying forced arbitration and its other draconian mechanisms, is unimaginable as far as the bureaucracy is concerned.

The trade unions function as the key enforcers of the government's industrial relations regime. The unions are now consciously isolating the nurses and other public sector workers from one another. On Thursday, the Health Services Union announced a deal with the

Baillieu government on a new enterprise bargaining agreement covering about 50,000 workers in the health care sector, including hospital cooks, cleaners and orderlies. The poorly-paid workers will receive a nominal wage rise of just 2.5 percent, or \$25 a week, whichever is greater. This substantial cut in real wages has paved the way for a similar regressive agreement covering the nurses.

The ANF is facilitating the Baillieu government's offensive. Nurses were previously told that the unlawful industrial action had to be abandoned in order to allow negotiations with the government to resume. This pretext was exposed earlier this week when it emerged that government negotiators have effectively boycotted talks with the union. The government has been uninterested in making any concessions from the beginning, and has no reason to offer any amid the ANF's demobilisation of the nurses' campaign.

The ANF leadership is desperate to secure an agreement that delivers the demanded "productivity" spending cuts. Lisa Fitzpatrick yesterday complained that the union had made an offer involving "flexibility" changes to nurse-patient ratios, which had been welcomed by government negotiators as an "incredibly significant proposal", yet had not resulted in an agreement. None of the nurses attending the mass meeting was informed of what was involved in this "flexibility" offer, but it can only mean a substantial erosion of existing staffing ratios and arrangements.

One nurse who attended the mass meeting told the *World Socialist Web Site*: "The [community rally] campaign is basically toothless... The disturbing thing was there was very little opposition, only one or two speakers. I thought it was extraordinary at the last meeting, the amount of power that was given to the secretary, giving her the authority to call off the action if there were proposals put forward by the government. Then we had the big rally, and the next day she calls off the action. It is so obvious that the secretary does not want any action outside what they perceive as the law."

While there was no open challenge to the union leaders at the meeting, concern is clearly developing among ordinary nurses about the ANF's actions. On social networking sites, many responded bitterly to the news that the mass meeting had not seen a vote to resume industrial action. "Rallies at hospitals with a bbq. That's showing them," one wrote. Another said,

"The government will pick money-saving tactics over popularity ... a rally just makes us feel we're doing something when really it counts for nothing."

The course of events has demonstrated, however, that this disquiet and anger has to be transformed into a conscious rebellion against the ANF. Within the confines of the union it is impossible to conduct any struggle to defend wages and conditions.

Independent rank-and-file committees should be formed, and a turn made to other sections of the working class, including public sector workers and health workers throughout the country. What is needed above all is a political alternative to the two big-business parties, Labor and Liberal, which have collaborated with the ANF over the past three decades to devastate the health system and the pay and conditions of nurses and other health workers. A new political leadership and perspective is required. Only on the basis of the struggle for socialism, which would expropriate the resources of major financial and private health institutions and place them under the democratic control of the working class, can a properly funded healthcare system be guaranteed to all.



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