

Australian nurses' union holds first "community rally"

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The first of 30 "community rallies" planned by the Australian Nursing Federation (ANF) was held in central Melbourne on Sunday, attended by just 250 nurses and supporters. The nurses' union previously declared that its so-called community campaign would advance the struggle against a government attack on their wages and working conditions. Sunday's event, however, underscored the fact that the bureaucracy is consciously working to demobilise and demoralise the nurses.

The state Liberal government of Ted Baillieu is determined to impose a real wage cut on the nurses and slash hospital funding by severely undermining existing mandatory staffing nurse-patient ratio protections, introducing poorly paid assistants with just eight weeks training into nursing roles, and bringing in "short shift" and "split shift" rostering flexibilities.

Nurses are aware these changes will have a catastrophic impact on the public health system. From the beginning of their campaign, the nurses confronted a combined assault from the Baillieu government and the federal Labor government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard. Labor's Fair Work Australia industrial relations regime banned their limited bed closures on November 16. A mass meeting of 4,000 nurses subsequently voted to defy the edict and maintain their industrial campaign despite threats of fines, docked pay, and imprisonment—but on November 25, the ANF anti-democratically ordered full compliance with Fair Work's directives.

Last Friday, the union announced "community rallies", supposedly as a means of building public support. The real agenda is to provide a diversion and a means of winding down the nurses' campaign, while efforts are stepped up to devise a sell-out deal acceptable to the government.

The first community rally was held outside two of the largest hospitals in inner Melbourne. Most of those in attendance were nurses on their lunchbreak, with their family members and also paramedics. One nurse who spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site* was critical of the ANF's failure to mobilise the union's membership for the event. "When you consider that the Royal Women's and the Royal Melbourne Hospitals are two premier hospitals in a prominent corner, the turnout to the rally was terrible," he said.

Another nurse with more than 20 years experience said: "We should have been out with all the other workers. The nurses, Health Services Union [members] and the teachers should all be going together. The Fair Work Australia decision and the use of Labor's laws makes me feel helpless and not to want to vote for Labor. How can you support either political party? They've got workers wrapped up in this country, and they'll dictate what they want us to do."

She continued: "This will all be privatised if we continue in this way. We don't want a system like in the US, where if you don't have private health insurance you don't get treated. Now we're moving to the system in England, where they've already introduced 12-hour shifts and nursing assistants. I worked there for two years in 1993-1994—it was a nightmare."

The speech delivered by ANF state secretary Lisa Fitzpatrick to the rally constituted a plea to the Baillieu government to work with the union to implement spending cuts and "productivity" reforms. "We want to go back to the negotiating table, we want to make sure that we get this dispute finished sooner rather than later," she declared. "We don't understand why [the] state government ... is determined to pick a fight with nurses and midwives in this state. We want things to

settle down, so that we can actually make sure we are moving forward.”

The ANF leadership is doing everything it can to prevent nurses from understanding the political forces that are aligned against them. Fitzpatrick even claimed, absurdly, that Baillieu “wants to negotiate an outcome.” In reality, government negotiators have effectively boycotted discussions with the union leadership. Their plan from the beginning has been to drag out the official negotiations for as long as possible in order to trigger “forced arbitration” under Fair Work Australia, which would result in the abolition of the nurse-patient ratios. Fitzpatrick revealed on Sunday that this could occur in March or April next year.

The ANF is desperately appealing to the state government not to dispense with its services. Fitzpatrick urged nurses at the community rally to “email the premier, email your local member [of parliament].” The nurses’ union is also running a television, radio and newspaper advertising campaign that costs more than \$200,000 a week, according to the *Herald Sun*.

At the same time, behind the backs of the nurses, the union leadership is offering major concessions to the government. The *Age* has today reported some details of the ANF’s offer to water down the nurse-patient ratios: “The nurses’ union proposal would establish a process for hospitals to cut nursing hours on particular wards if certain conditions could be met; removing a current right of veto by staff and the union. It would also allow hospitals to redistribute existing nursing hours within wards over a 28-day period.”

The Victorian Hospitals Industrial Association, negotiating on behalf of the government, described the offer as “very significant” and said that “the ANF had moved further than it ever anticipated.” It nevertheless rejected the offer, clearly determined to impose in full the government’s demanded “reforms.”



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