

Australia: Letter on the Victorian nurses' struggle

8 December 2011

A mental health nurse in Australia sent the following letter on the ongoing struggle of Victorian public hospital nurses in defence of wages and conditions. (See: "The Australian trade unions and the betrayal of the Victorian nurses' struggle").

As a nurse I have been following the struggle of my colleagues closely and your commentary on the *World Socialist Web Site*.

I began my nursing career over 12 years ago working in a large public hospital and later moved into mental health. I am now employed in a Community Mental Health Team that provides case management. I studied for 6 years; the state Baillieu government now wants to bring in Health Assistants who will have 6-8 weeks of training!!

I have experienced many different areas of nursing and have met some amazing, hardworking and selfless nurses. For many, nursing isn't only our job, it actually defines us and is an expression of our personal values. I have heard many nurses say: "Nursing isn't what I do it's who I am."

While the nurses through the ANF [Australian Nursing Federation] have been campaigning to negotiate their EBA [Enterprise Bargaining Agreement] so have other sections of the health-care workforce. Mental health clinicians, such as myself, are currently engaged in EBA negotiations through the Health and Community Services Union and are faced with the same attacks, including the drive for split shifts. At the same time, child protection workers are currently faced with similar conditions and are attempting to negotiate their EBA. Last week the Health Services Union agreed

to the government's offer, effectively accepting a wage cut.

Nurses have been forced to take a stand because for many years they have been faced with chronic under-resourcing. In every area it's the same picture, nurses run off their feet day in and day out, engaged in fundraising to buy necessary equipment, working untold hours of unpaid overtime. There are no more productivity gains to be made, nurses' backs are already hard pressed against the wall.

In mental health, the conditions are just as appalling with demand far outweighing available resources. Only 8 percent of the state's health budget goes to mental health. An estimated 3 million Australians (20 percent of the population aged 16-85 years) experience symptoms of a mental disorder each year and an estimated 7 million Australians (45 percent of the population aged 16-85 years) will experience a mental disorder over their lifetime.

One doesn't have to look very hard to find horror stories of poverty and hopelessness, carers suffering emotional and financial burnout, carrying the burden of a system that cannot provide an adequate service. Huge numbers of homeless people are suffering mental health issues whilst others are paying exorbitant rents usually in unregulated boarding houses. Many clinicians use their own money to provide food or pay for medicine for patients.

Community Teams have become accustomed to functioning with vacant positions and huge case load numbers. Some teams have been left functioning at half staff and are placed under constant pressure to push discharges through, against their own clinical

judgement. Mental health clinicians recognise that our clients are some of the most disadvantaged members of society.

I have been closely following the recent events; nurses have loyally looked to the ANF for leadership and direction. Bravely, 4,000 nurses voted unanimously to continue their bans through bed closures despite the orders imposed by Fair Work Australia, well aware of the risk of fines and even jail. Within days the ANF leadership undemocratically overturned this decision then proceeded to channel the nurses' struggle into "community rallies" in their own lunch breaks!! Nurses already have the support of the community.

I believe this move has not been accidental and has been aimed at containing and shutting down the nurses' struggle, isolating them into tiny groups who will eventually grow tired of chanting slogans to passing cars!!

It is clear that the ANF is unable to provide the necessary leadership to nurses to defend their conditions, and that the leadership is complicit in helping the government impose these attacks. They offer no analysis or perspective for the nurses, rather they propose that they pressure the Baillieu government with protest action. These union bureaucrats serve to prop up the very forces who are waging ruthless attacks on the conditions of the nurses and other health-care sectors.

The Socialist Equality Party and the WSWS is the only organisation that has offered the nurses a clear analysis and way forward in their struggle. Nurses engaged in this struggle are in the midst of learning bitter but necessary lessons.

The existing health-care system can only be defended by taking this struggle out of the hands of the union leadership and outside of the current Fair Work Australia legislation. Nurses need to set up independent rank and file committees at every hospital and site and elect their own representatives. Nurses, mental health clinicians, and all other health-care workers need to come together in a unified struggle to defend the current conditions and turn out to other sections of the

working class like teachers, child protection workers and Qantas employees.

I have no illusions that this task will be easy, but it is clear that there is no other way of fighting to defend public health-care and the conditions for those of us who want to practice our profession in a safe environment and provide adequate care to our patients.

I believe that the cold hard truth is that any further cuts to health-care will result in increasing "adverse events", including patient deaths. Nurses, mental health clinicians, child protection workers, and in fact all health-care workers are faced with an ethical question, accept the stripping away of further conditions and the resulting outcomes or fight. I believe that we must fight, anything less would be negligent.

Thank you for this ongoing excellent coverage and analysis.

In solidarity,
AL
Melbourne



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact