

Australian nurses' union announces "mass resignation" stunt

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The Australian Nursing Federation (ANF) convened another members' meeting in Melbourne last Friday and announced it would collect resignation letters from nurses, supposedly in order to pressure the Victorian state government to back down from its drive to slash funding and staffing levels in the public hospital system. The mass resignation threat is a cynical stunt by the union bureaucracy to isolate and wear down the nurses' determined struggle in defence of their jobs, conditions and wages.

On November 21, a previous meeting of about 4,500 nurses had voted to defy the federal Labor government's Fair Work Australia industrial tribunal, rejecting threats of fines and jail sentences for their work bans in the hospitals. Following the Fair Work ban on the Qantas workers' industrial campaign, the nurses' defiance posed a serious challenge to Prime Minister Julia Gillard and her Labor government's pro-business economic restructuring agenda.

The ANF then swung into action to shut down the nurses' campaign. On November 25, the ANF ordered an end to all industrial action. The union promoted "community rallies" outside Victoria's hospitals, consisting of isolated events that were deliberately intended to demoralise nurses. The impact was evident at last Friday's meeting, which was attended by fewer than 1,000 people.

The ANF announced the resignation threat as part of its continued appeals to state Premier Ted Baillieu to sign a new enterprise agreement. The resolution adopted at the meeting called on nurses to "visit state politicians to seek their support" and to "continue raising community awareness through letterboxing and doorknocking our local communities." After the meeting, the nurses marched to state Health Minister David Davis's office, where the union delivered

petitions signed by 40,000 people.

The ANF said it would hold members' meetings in hospitals during January and February to discuss the mass resignation threat. The union has begun collecting resignation letters from nurses and will reportedly consider whether to deliver them to the state government sometime between February and March. ANF state secretary Lisa Fitzpatrick told the *Age*: "It's a very last resort, but we've been negotiating for over 380 hours and we have no budging on behalf of the government, it's only the ANF that is giving ground."

The union has offered significant concessions that would undermine the existing nurse-patient ratio staffing provisions. However, the Baillieu government has made clear that it is unwilling to back down from any of its demands—including a real wage cut for nurses, abolishing nurse-patient ratio limits, and introducing split shifts and new lower paid nursing assistants.

The government is being driven by the same economic imperatives that lie behind the international attacks on public sector workers' wages and jobs. Baillieu last week announced that the Victorian public service workforce would be slashed by 10 percent, affecting 3,600 jobs, in order to maintain the budget surpluses demanded by the financial markets and credit ratings agencies.

At every stage, the ANF has facilitated the government's offensive—and the resignation stunt has again played into Baillieu's hands. The media has issued sensationalised reports of looming "chaos" in the hospitals, while the health minister has declared that "we have every conceivable contingency covered."

According to the *Australian* on Saturday: "The government is expected to consider a Qantas-style lockout of nurses after already receiving advice on how

to lock out staff and bring in a strike-breaking workforce.”

In the face of a threatened unprecedented lockout of nurses from public hospitals, the ANF is sowing divisions among nurses. The mass resignation threat has been met with considerable scepticism and opposition. On social networking sites, many nurses said they could not sign resignation letters because of their personal financial situation and family responsibilities. The ANF’s Fitzpatrick contemptuously dismissed such concerns, declaring that she hoped resigning nurses would not leave the profession entirely, as “there are other opportunities in the private sector and in work agency nursing.”

Many nurses have rightly noted that the state government would welcome resignations as a means of slashing staffing numbers. Before the nurse-patient ratios were introduced 11 years ago, there were approximately 20,000 fewer registered nurses and midwives in Victoria. Baillieu could fill any vacancies after resignations with the new nursing assistants, who will receive as little as eight weeks’ training before being placed in nursing roles.

The state government is clearly seeking to create conditions in which Fair Work Australia intervenes against the nurses and imposes an agreement that excludes nurse-patient ratios. The ANF is cynically using this threat to argue against any form of industrial action. Fitzpatrick, sitting alongside Australian Council of Trade Unions president Ged Kearney, told nurses at last Friday’s mass meeting: “We have made it very clear to the government representatives that we will not be triggering anything that will lead to arbitration. It is quite critical that the government recognise that, so that when they sit at the negotiating table they take it seriously.”

The ANF has attempted to block any understanding among nurses that Fair Work can intervene on multiple grounds. The Gillard government and its industrial tribunal will intervene immediately to arbitrate an agreement in the event of a Qantas-style lockout. Similarly, if negotiations between the state government and the union remain deadlocked after several months, then Fair Work will determine the outcome.

The ANF’s role in the nurses’ dispute reflects the fact that the trade unions function as the enforcers of the Labor government’s draconian industrial relations

regime. They are playing the key role in assisting the offensive against workers’ living standards that is being coordinated between big business and the state and federal governments.

The nurses’ campaign is now in serious danger. Leadership of the struggle must be taken out of the hands of the ANF officials, with unified rank-and-file committees formed in every hospital and health service and led by elected representatives. These committees must turn out to other sections of workers facing similar attacks. This includes in the first instance other Victorian public sector workers, including health care workers, public servants and teachers, who all confront the same demands by the state government for real wage cuts, job losses and “productivity” concessions. Joint demonstrations, mass meetings, work bans and strikes must be prepared to defend jobs and living standards.

At the same time, nurses should spearhead a wider struggle against the Gillard government and its union-backed Fair Work laws, especially appealing to dockworkers, Qantas employees and others who have been targeted by the industrial tribunal. This industrial and political campaign requires an alternative to the two big business parties, Labor and Liberal, and the development of a new political leadership based on a socialist and internationalist perspective.



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