

Australian nurses' union betrays protracted industrial struggle

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The Australian Nurses Federation (ANF) announced on Wednesday an end to the protracted nine-month industrial campaign waged by public hospital nurses and midwives in Victoria over a new enterprise bargaining agreement (EBA).

The state Liberal government of Premier Ted Baillieu has made no concessions whatsoever, but the union bureaucracy insists that closed-door negotiations will conclude with an agreement for a new EBA by next Friday, March 16. The ANF is carrying out an abject betrayal of the nurses' struggle, preparing to announce significant concessions on wages and working conditions.

The union's sell-out is entirely in line with last month's intervention into the dispute by federal Workplace Relations Minister Bill Shorten. Acting on behalf of the Gillard government, he moved to shut down the nurses' struggle via mediation by the federal Labor's Fair Work Australia (FWA) industrial tribunal. Shorten's involvement highlights the central role of the federal Labor government, in league with the unions, in suppressing the dispute.

Between February 24 and March 7, nurses staged twice daily walk-outs of up to four hours duration at about 15 hospitals across the state, in defiance of the FWA and a Federal Court ruling. The nurses risked hefty fines and possible imprisonment. The action followed their similarly defiant and "illegal" closures of a limited number of hospital beds last November. The ANF leadership arbitrarily shut down the latest action, just as widespread public support for the nurses and against the government was developing.

On Wednesday morning, ANF state secretary Lisa Fitzpatrick told a rally of nurses outside the Alfred Hospital there had been a "significant breakthrough" and "we have a commitment from the government and the employers—we are back in Fair Work Australia [to negotiate]." She visited several hospitals to ensure that nurses stopped their strikes and protests.

Fitzpatrick later declared that "the government coming back to the negotiation table is a big step forward, it's very positive ... I don't have an agreement yet but I'm very confident that I'll get an agreement." In other words, the union has effectively declared the campaign over, without the government conceding any of the nurses' demands and without any discussion among ordinary nurses, let alone a democratic vote.

Victorian nurses are the lowest paid in the country. The ANF initially demanded a wage rise of 18.5 percent over four years, about equal with cost-of-living increases, but has now indicated that this demand is a dead letter. An Associated Press journalist earlier this week asked Fitzpatrick if she expected the nurses to receive their wage claim. "We don't, clearly now nine months down the track," she stated.

The Baillieu government indicated that it expects nurses to accept its public sector wages ceiling of 2.5 percent—a significant real wage cut—with anything above that offset by "bankable" productivity savings, that is, through reduced staffing levels and other cutbacks. Health Minister David Davis declared on Wednesday: "The government's wages policy is as it stands at 2.5 percent, plus additional things to be negotiated. All the details inside that will have to be exactly that—negotiated."

None of the staffing and workplace conditions issues at stake in the EBA has been resolved. The government aims to substantially erode existing mandatory nurse-patient ratios, under which one nurse is employed for every four patients during day shifts in acute care hospitals, and axe an estimated 1,700 full-time nursing jobs. Baillieu also hopes to slash hospital costs by introducing lower-paid “health assistants” to perform tasks currently done by trained nurses, and by introducing four-hour and split shifts, further casualising the hospital workforce.

Victorian Hospitals Industry Association chief executive Alec Djoneff has led the negotiations with the ANF on behalf of the government. Last year, he drafted detailed plans for a potential lockout of nursing staff. His remarks on Wednesday confirm that the ANF has offered significant concessions. “The parties have made a fair bit of progress on the key matters,” Djoneff explained. “No agreement has been reached, but we have had some discussions that have given us confidence that the conciliation process will enable us to substantially dispose of the matters in dispute in that timeframe [i.e. by March 16].”

The government responded to the end of the industrial campaign by agreeing to “hold all legal action and options in abeyance”—leaving open the possibility, if the new EBA is not finalised, of reviving criminal investigations and charges against the nurses who went on strike.

Nurses will also not be paid back any of their wages withheld by hospital management in the past fortnight. Under federal Labor’s industrial laws, wages must be docked for at least four hours if “illegal” action is taken, even when, as with the nurses, they stop work for as little as an hour.

From the beginning of the EBA negotiation, the ANF sought to preserve its privileged position within the health system by cutting a deal with the government that would involve substantial productivity and wage concessions. Fitzpatrick emphasised five months ago: “Every step of the way the ANF has negotiated in good faith, we’ve given ground to accommodate the

employers’ claims and we’ve refined our claims.”

The union has done everything it can to block the development of a political struggle by nurses against the Baillieu government and the federal government of Julia Gillard. The ANF leadership has promoted illusions in the Labor Party, organising door knocking campaigns in marginal electorates held by the Liberal Party, ahead of the next state election due in three years.

Fitzpatrick also welcomed as good coin state Labor leader Daniel Andrews’ claim that he stood “shoulder to shoulder” with the nurses. She deliberately covered up the role he played in the previous state Labor government as health minister, when he attempted to erode nurses’ working conditions and used the former Howard government’s WorkChoices legislation against them.

The ANF was assisted at every turn by the pseudo-left organisations, Socialist Alternative and Socialist Alliance, which sought to bolster the union leadership’s credibility among nurses and promote illusions in the Labor Party. Above all, they attempted to block nurses from discussing the political issues raised by their struggle with the Socialist Equality Party, including the need to organise independent rank-and-file committees in every hospital and fight on the basis of a socialist perspective.



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