

Australian nurses' union imposes real wage cut

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The Australian Nursing Federation (ANF) in Victoria has announced a sell-out deal with the state Liberal government for a new enterprise bargaining agreement (EBA) covering public hospital nurses and midwives. The agreement, quickly rammed through a mass meeting of nurses yesterday, involves a substantial real wage cut and a significant “flexibility” concession that erodes existing mandatory nurse-to-patient staffing ratios.

Nurses had campaigned for months in defence of their wages and conditions, winning wide support among other workers. They defied the federal Labor government's Fair Work Australia industrial laws, shutting down some hospital beds last November and then staging rolling stoppages in several hospitals in recent weeks.

However, the overriding priority for the ANF bureaucracy was to maintain their privileged position within the health sector and to prevent the nurses' dispute from developing into a political struggle against the state and federal governments.

ANF leaders welcomed federal Workplace Relations minister Bill Shorten to yesterday's mass meeting as a friend of the nurses. In reality, he and the Gillard government have been their bitter enemy. Under its anti-democratic Fair Work Australia laws, nurses were threatened with large individual fines and jail. Shorten played a key role in brokering the sell-out agreement which reflects Gillard's austerity agenda aimed at gutting long-term public health spending and at undermining the wages and conditions of all public

sector workers.

The union shut down the nurses' strike action on March 7, declaring that the Liberal government's agreement to negotiate through Fair Work Australia marked a “breakthrough.” Nurses were given no opportunity to consider and discuss the outcome of these closed door negotiations before approving the new EBA. Yesterday's mass meeting, attended by several thousand nurses from hospitals across Melbourne and Victoria, voted in favour of the agreement after the ANF leadership presented a verbal report on the details.

The ANF agreed to the government's public sector wage ceiling of 2.5 percent a year—lower than the 4.5 percent official annual cost of living increase. Moreover, there will be no back pay covering the period since the previous EBA expired last year. Victorian nurses will remain among the lowest paid in Australia.

The union promoted additional new professional development allowances—cash bonuses of \$1,000 in the first year of the agreement for full-time nurses, and \$900 each year after—which ANF state secretary Lisa Fitzpatrick said will “assist with the recent changes to their annual re-registration professional development obligations.” These payments will not be rolled into nurses' base salary, but the ANF nevertheless included the sums in their reported percentage increases in nurses' wages over the four-year EBA. Misleading media reports subsequently claimed that nurses won up to 21 percent higher wages. One category of nurses is

now so poorly paid that a 2.5 percent annual wage increase, plus the professional development allowances, is equivalent to a 21 percent rise over four years.

The ANF also agreed to a new clause on the “flexibility” of nursing ratios, which for the last decade have mandated one nurse for every four patients being treated. Previously, hospital management required the express permission of affected nurses to operate shifts below the mandated ratio. Now, however, all that is needed is that “the employer must consider the consequences of any proposal to go below ratios, in good faith”, supposedly taking into account various factors including “nursing staff satisfaction” and “quality of care/clinical risk.” The union claimed that such “strict criteria” would only be warranted in “very limited circumstances”, but the reality confronting ordinary nurses will be very different. The clause will be mercilessly exploited by hospital management desperate to cut spending in line with federal and state government directives.

Despite the regressive character of the new EBA, the ANF claimed a victory on the basis that nurse-patient ratios had not been abolished, short and split shifts were still not permitted, and low paid and unskilled “health assistants” would not be introduced. A state government cabinet briefing, leaked to the media last year, indicated that all these measures were being considered, to reduce hospital costs.

A significant minority of nurses have expressed scepticism in the union’s declaration of a “victory.” On a social networking site, one nurse rejected claims that the government had backed down from any of its demands: “I actually figured a while ago this was their game plan all along ... Leak their own [cabinet] document, let everybody get het up over ratios and stuff. Then sit back and refuse to negotiate so that in the end nurses think they have saved the ratios that weren’t really going to be touched, as a red herring over the wage ... sucked in chewed up and spat out! You gotta hand it to them, the masters of dirty play!”

A nurse told the *World Socialist Web Site*: “The mass meeting was bizarre. The money is not really a pay rise. The professional development payment exists

elsewhere, in the Northern Territory. But this is simply a pay-off, \$1,000 to shut up and go back to work. When I saw the first online news headline about having gained 21 percent I couldn’t believe it. It is such misrepresentation... No doubt nurses haven’t done the figures. They have been worn down... The vote [for the EBA at the mass meeting] was unanimous, I looked around and it was. The thing about dissent—it is silent. I know there are other people around like me, but it is not organised.”

The ANF’s determination to prevent the emergence of any opposition to its operations was reflected yesterday in the bureaucracy’s hostility towards a team of Socialist Equality Party supporters, who spoke to nurses before the mass meeting and distributed a WSWS article, “Australian nurses’ union betrays protracted industrial struggle”, which warned that a sell out was being prepared. ANF officials instructed nurses arriving at the meeting venue not to take any copies of the article. Later, an individual from the Maritime Union of Australia aggressively confronted the SEP supporters, demanding they leave the area because they were “turning nurses against their union.”

The crucial political lesson from this betrayal is that it is impossible to fight for nurses and other sections of workers to fight for their basic rights within the straitjacket of the trade unions. As the Socialist Equality Party has raised from the outset, what is needed is a rank-and-file rebellion against these organisations and a political fight against the state and federal governments on the basis of a socialist perspective.



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