

Australia: Union isolates striking Victorian nurses

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Up to 1,500 nurses across the state of Victoria confront the threat of hefty fines and jail terms after continuing rolling stoppages and rallies at 15 hospitals in support of a new enterprise agreement and in defiance of a Federal Court order on Tuesday to end the campaign.

The court directive followed last week's ruling by the federal Labor government's Fair Work Australia (FWA) industrial court, which deemed the strikes "unprotected" and banned all industrial action until June 1. The rolling stoppages began on Friday, after a mass meeting of 3,000 nurses on February 22 voted overwhelmingly in support.

The response of the Australian Nursing Federation (ANF) has been completely duplicitous. On the one hand, in a bid to maintain some credibility among its members, the trade union's leaders claim to "unofficially" support the industrial action. On the other, they have carried out every demand of the courts: issuing an order to end industrial action, including via Twitter messages to nurses.

The ANF's manoeuvring is of a piece with its actions since the beginning of the campaign. The union has been seeking all along to contain any action by nurses and reach a deal behind closed doors with the state government of Premier Ted Baillieu to shut down the dispute. The ANF has repeatedly pledged to call off all action if the Victorian government agrees to "voluntary arbitration" by the FWA, as proposed by federal workplace minister Bill Shorten. Shorten's intervention underscores the federal Gillard government's concern to shut down the dispute as soon as possible.

ANF secretary Lisa Fitzpatrick yesterday told Australian Associated Press: "We are trying to contain this dispute. We are trying to stop it from being a state-wide strike." At the same time, she cynically declared: "I'm proud of the stand that our members are taking. They have our support and we stand shoulder to shoulder."

Other union officials—including from the manufacturing, construction, education and telecommunication sectors—have been mobilised to address rallies of striking nurses to give the illusion of wider union support. But these unions are no more willing than the ANF to challenge the FWA apparatus and the Labor

government—all of them voted at the 2007 Labor Party conference to support the FWA legislation.

As a result, nurses courageously taking strike action in defiance of the court decision are being left to face the full force of state apparatus. The only way of defeating the threat of fines and jail is to mobilise nurses as a whole and turn out to other sections of the working class, including nurses in all states, in a political offensive against the Baillieu and Gillard governments.

However, that is exactly what the ANF and unions fear and are working might and main to prevent. The ANF leadership has made no call for a state-wide mass meeting of nurses and has not criticised the court decisions or the Gillard government that backs them.

Victorian Health Minister David Davis denounced nurses yesterday, claiming their action was "designed to hurt patients, designed to harm people, designed to make vulnerable people suffer." He warned that the government was "gathering evidence" and "taking legal advice" about its next steps against the nurses.

The dispute, involving 30,000 nurses and mid-wives, began last year when the ANF lodged a claim for an 18.5 percent wage rise over four years and the maintenance of existing conditions. In line with the Gillard government's cost-cutting health program, the Baillieu government responded by demanding that the annual nursing budget be slashed by at least \$104 million.

Baillieu plans to axe over 1,700 full-time nursing jobs and use lower-paid "health assistants," introduce unlimited four-hour and split shifts, and eliminate current nurse-patient ratios. Established in 2000, the ratios stipulate one nurse for four patients during day shifts in acute care hospitals.

Nurses have repeatedly demonstrated their determination to defend their jobs and working conditions. They voted overwhelmingly for a bed closure and work ban campaign last November, only to have it ruled "illegal" by the FWA. The ANF soon fell into line and lifted all industrial action, defying a previous mass meeting vote to ignore any FWA directives. To maintain support among nurses, the ANF staged a series of protest stunts to divert attention from its anti-democratic decision.

Nurses should begin to draw the necessary political lessons from their experiences. The only way to fight to defend their conditions is in a rebellion against the ANF, which functions as an enforcement agency for the state and federal governments. The first step is to form rank-and-file committees independent of the unions and to appeal to other nurses and sections of workers facing similar attacks.

Such a struggle will quickly confront the state and federal governments, which will not hesitate to use the courts and the police against nurses. This necessitates a political fight to unify workers against the austerity agenda of finance capital being imposed across the board in Australia and internationally. That can be done only on the basis of a socialist program, including the creation of a decent public health system to provide free, high quality care for all and good wages and conditions for health workers.

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Striking nurses and their supporters spoke with WSWs reporters at rallies outside their hospitals.

A Royal Melbourne Hospital nurse said: “The law says we can’t strike but this is part of the flow on from privatisation. It should be the right of every unionist to strike. Every worker in Australia should have the right to take action.

“We can’t stay within the FWA framework,” she continued. “We have a rightful duty of care to patients, in nursing homes as well as in hospitals. We’ve reached consensus on duty of care. We can’t work in a satisfactory manner if there is any further disruption of the staffing ratio.

“We have had to work within the legal framework as long as possible, but now we have reached the limit. Health care is a basic human right.”

Western Hospital nurses said the government was attempting to turn hospitals into sub-standard nursing homes. An ancillary worker commented: “The way the government is treating the nurses is disgusting. I used to work at Fairfield [Infectious Diseases Hospital]. In 1996 they shut it down and everybody was left in limbo. Nowadays, nurses haven’t got time to treat the patients, the way it was done at Fairfield. The nurses are so stressed now you can see it on their faces.”

Another nurse said: “The young ones have no idea what they’re going to come up against if we lose the ratios. One of them said to me, ‘The workload today is chaotic.’ If we don’t take action, this is what we’ll be facing all the time. Every time we go to FWA, we can’t win anything.”

Nurses rallying at Melbourne’s Maroondah Hospital were joined by workers from other facilities. A Peter James Centre nurse said:

“I’ve been a nurse for 32 years. It’s really wrong that the government is trying to take ratios off us. They want to bring in untrained staff. We’ve been to uni to get a degree to look after patients. We’re not going to risk our registrations if something happens with an untrained staff member that we’re responsible for. We don’t want to come to work at 7 a.m. and go back home at 9.30 a.m. on a split shift.”

Julie and Astrid had just finished night shift and joined the rally. Julie denounced the FWA, saying that “fair” was not an accurate description of the tribunal. “It does whatever it wants. I’ve never known a government to make a decision so quickly, as it did in trying to stop our strike.”

The FWA was “not an independent umpire,” a William Angliss Hospital nurse said. “What the government is doing bastardry,” she added. “The government has an agenda at the expense of good health. It’s not so much about nurses. They’re using nurses as a scapegoat. As nurses we are not valued.”

Lee, a Northern Hospital nurse, said: “If assistants make mistakes, nurses will be held responsible. I will be forced to resign if these changes come in—quite a few nurses are doing the same thing.”

Her husband Andrew, a panel beater, said: “[Premier] Baillieu claims that we’re endangering lives by going on strike, but the measures that he wants to introduce will endanger more people in Victoria. And Fair Work Australia ordered that we stop industrial action! There is definitely some sort of corruption going on.

“There is a new economic regime internationally, where they’re trying to minimise workers’ rights. When their profits increase by three times, they want them to go up by five times. But there is more to life and to hospitals than money. Here, they want to save billions—and they’re following what’s already been happening in the US.”



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