

# Union calls off Western Australian nurses' strike

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The Australian Nursing Federation (ANF) in Western Australia called off a strike on Monday on the basis of a sell-out deal with Liberal Party Premier Colin Barnett, including a pay rise that was significantly less than the wages claim endorsed by a mass meeting of over 1,000 nurses and midwives last Friday.

Following last Friday's mass meeting, nurses had defied an Industrial Relations Commission order to end their week-long bans, which had closed one in five hospital beds. They had also signalled their willingness to strike despite a government threat to deregister any nurse who participated, thus stripping them of their right to work in a hospital.

ANF state secretary Mark Olson, however, was clearly desperate to prevent the strike, which risked turning into a political confrontation with the Barnett government prior to the March 9 state election. Olson stitched up a deal with Barnett on Sunday for a 14 percent wage increase over three years, then pushed it through a hastily convened mass meeting the following day, despite resistance and opposition by nurses.

Olson boasted to the media on Monday that he had averted the strike. He told the *West Australian*: "In my 14 years [as state secretary] I've never led nurses out on a strike and that's how serious it was. We were on the verge of a strike."

The union hailed the pay agreement as "a victory" for nurses, making them the highest paid in Australia. But the deal is only "in-principle"—to be finalised after the March 9 election. A number of issues, including the government's demands for increased productivity, that is, job losses and the further erosion of working conditions, have been put to one side.

The ANF cynically pressed for a new enterprise agreement before the election, even though the current agreement was not due to expire until June. Olson

hoped to boost the union's credibility among nurses and health workers amid growing anger over its manifest failure to defend the public health system or wages and conditions in the face of spiralling living costs.

The union also sought to assist the opposition Labor Party's campaign by confronting the Liberal government over health issues. Significantly the ANF has not explicitly called for a vote for Labor, which is testimony to the widespread disgust with previous Labor state governments and Prime Minister Julia Gillard's Labor government in Canberra. The last state Labor government, which was thrown out of office in 2008, presided over a major deterioration in the health system, and attempted to close down Royal Perth, the state's largest hospital.

Barnett initially ruled out any wage increase over 9 percent over three years. Once the election was announced in early February, he declared that no negotiations would take place because the government was in "caretaker mode." Amid broad public support for the nurses and their grievances over the cost-of-living, Labor leader Mark McGowan jumped on the bandwagon by insisting that a deal could be negotiated and pledging to honour it if Labor won office on March 9.

The nurses' fight was set to continue into the final week of the election campaign, which neither the government, the opposition nor the union wanted. Industrial action by nurses, drawing support from other sections of the working class, threatened to raise uncomfortable questions for them all. The unions have colluded with both Labor and Liberal governments in attacking living standards and slashing spending on essential social services such as health.

Barnett reversed his position and signed the deal on

Sunday, declaring that he was concerned that the industrial action would affect patient care.

What a fraud! The Liberal government has continued the understaffing and under-resourcing of the health system that prevailed under previous Labor governments. Public hospital waiting lists for elective surgery and specialist appointments are at near record levels. A number of regional hospitals, servicing large populations, still have accident and emergency departments without a full time doctor, which has led to patient deaths (see: “Western Australia: Children’s deaths expose health crisis”).

The Barnett government imposed budget cuts of \$330 million and a public sector staffing freeze last September. The Health Department has already been hit by a 2 percent “efficiency dividend” as part of the across-the-board funding cuts to the public sector announced in last May’s budget.

After initially grandstanding as an opponent of the federal Labor government’s “hospital reform” program, which ties all funding to cost-cutting “performance” targets, Barnett has collaborated closely with it, boasting of a “good working relationship” with Gillard on healthcare. As part of this agenda, the Fiona Stanley Hospital in Perth’s southern suburbs, due to open in April 2014, will contract out 38 “non-clinical services,” including medical records, catering, cleaning, support services, radiology and maintenance. In another privatisation push, the Swan Districts Hospital in Perth’s eastern suburbs will be replaced by a “Public Private Partnership” hospital in nearby Midland.

The reality is that regardless of which party wins the state election, or the federal election scheduled for September 14, the incoming governments will impose deeper cuts to public health to meet corporate demands for balanced budgets and lower taxes. And the ANF and other trade unions will collaborate in imposing this austerity agenda on nurses, health workers and the working class as a whole.

The essential precondition for waging a genuine struggle to defend public health and the basic rights of health workers is a complete break from the unions, the formation of rank-and-file committees and the turn to other sections of workers on the basis of a fight for a workers’ government and socialist policies. The essential social right to free, high quality health care

requires the complete reorganisation of society to meet the needs of the majority, not the profits of the corporate elite.

Last Sunday, a WSWs reporting team spoke to staff and visitors outside Fremantle Hospital.

Ann-Marie, a patient support assistant, supported the nurses’ proposed strike and condemned the role of the health sector unions. “I feel they do nothing for us and I feel paying union dues is a waste of money,” she commented. “It is difficult with the high cost-of-living to make ends meet and the increase in wages is not covering the cost-of-living for many people in Western Australia.”

A man visiting his wife, a hospital patient, said he was shocked that the government had threatened to deregister nurses if they went on strike. “Nurses are entitled to an increase,” he insisted. “The politicians have given themselves pay rises. I disagree with the media reports that the proposed strike would put lives at risk. The worst thing that could happen is that the nurses give in, because once you give up your entitlements they are gone forever.”

Emily, a disability worker, said: “We work hard to try and help clients but we often run out of time to complete our paperwork as part of the job. Some of us stay back and finish the work and we don’t get paid for that. There are staff shortages and we do unpaid overtime. I don’t mind doing it, but really we should be paid for overtime we do.” Lucy, an aged care worker, added: “Privatisation is not a good idea. It is all about profit, profit, profit, and patient care goes down.”



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