

Union seeks to derail New Zealand nurses' struggle

Tom Peters
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Over the past week thousands of healthcare workers and their supporters have rallied outside hospitals across New Zealand to demand decent wages and working conditions.

The rallies were called by the New Zealand Nurses Organisation (NZNO) after the country's 27,000 public hospital nurses, midwives and other health care workers voted last month to reject a sellout offer of a 2 percent pay increase. The pay deal was opposed by workers in December 2017, only to be re-packaged and presented again by the union in March.

For at least a decade, wages have been essentially frozen, relative to inflation. Nurses are also demanding safer working conditions and staffing levels, which have not kept pace with population growth.

The nurses' rejection of the offer, accompanied by widespread calls for a nationwide strike, is part of a rising tide of class struggle internationally. In the United States, teachers have taken sustained strike action in several states, in defiance of the education unions that have sought to shut down the movement. France is experiencing a wave of strikes and student protests against the Macron government's austerity measures.

The NZNO is seeking to bring the growing movement under control and subordinate it to the Labour Party-led coalition government. It is doing everything possible to avoid a strike.

While the government has feigned sympathy for the nurses, on April 9, Finance Minister Grant Robertson said the upcoming May budget could not "make up for nine years of neglect," in health and other sectors, under the previous National Party government. In fact, Labour is refusing to increase taxes on the rich and promised to keep spending at roughly the same level as National. On April 11, *New Zealand Herald* columnist

Bryce Edwards noted that Labour was "essentially running austerity economic policy," meaning it would "continue to underfund areas like health and education."

The NZNO agreed on April 12 to Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's proposal for a so-called "independent panel," with representatives from the union, the government and the District Health Boards (DHBs), to negotiate a new pay agreement. The NZNO will be represented by its former chief executive Geoff Annals, who now heads Accuro Health Insurance, a private "not-for-profit" company.

The NZNO has also announced it will hold a ballot for industrial action but not specified when or what options will be given to union members. Nor has the union put forward any pay claim, leaving this open to negotiation.

Nurses have voiced their own demands in the Facebook group "New Zealand, please hear our voice," which was established by individual nurses and has a following of more than 45,000 people. One of the most "liked" posts, from Auckland nurse Yatika Mistry on April 1, called for a pay rise of 20 to 30 percent, a "nurse to patient ratio of 4 patients to 1 nurse for safe staffing," and extra pay for nurses with higher qualifications.

Many in the group angrily have denounced the NZNO's stalling tactics. On April 12 an anonymous post said the union agreed to the government's panel "without consulting its members!!... All over social media it states that WE are NZNO yet we don't have any say in this—who is making the decisions!! It's not the nurses that's for sure!"

The post attracted dozens of comments in agreement. Sheryl said: "I too am so disillusioned. This process will take months. [In all] likelihood they will come

back with two percent. Why do NZNO continually disappoint us[?]"

Perryn stated: "NZNO in my opinion does not listen to its members at all. I for one have no confidence in them. They ask us to back them but they go behind union members back and agree to this."

Adrienne commented: "Independent panel my arse... Do you call this negotiation? It's going in cap in hand with a bowl and saying sorry."

After 105 responses, a group administrator disabled commenting on the post. Administrators have also deleted and refused to approve articles from the *World Socialist Web Site*, without explanation. Such efforts to restrict and censor discussion are aimed at assisting the union bureaucracy and the Labour Party in their efforts to prevent a strike and impose a sellout deal.

Health workers must urgently discuss the need to break from the union and establish rank-and-file committees controlled by the workers themselves. These committees must link up with other sections of workers coming into struggle in New Zealand and internationally.

Above all, workers need a socialist perspective. The fight for decent healthcare cannot be subordinated to what the Labour government and the ruling class declare "affordable," but must be guided by the basic needs of the entire working class. Tens of billions of dollars must be diverted from the super-rich, the banks and the military to build hospitals and hire thousands more health workers on decent wages.

At a rally outside Wellington Hospital on April 13, nurses told WSWS reporters why they want to strike.

Kathleen, who has been a nurse for three years, said she wanted an 18 percent pay rise. "Our shifts are eight hours but we stay longer just because we have to finish our documents, our notes, our medications," she said. "That speaks volumes in terms of the resources that we are working with at the moment. It is challenging, it is stressful. Because you are dealing with a person's life, you want to make sure that you're doing it right."

Her colleague, **Kyle**, said: "I've been here eight years. Nothing has changed over that time. Our main concern is safe staffing, patient safety. The pressure is building up. We are one or two nurses short regularly."

Several nurses told the WSWS that experienced colleagues had left to seek jobs in Australia, where registered nurses can sometimes earn 30 percent more.

One nurse explained that the hospital was under considerable pressure dealing with more acute mental health patients. She added that there were "more people presenting to the emergency department these days because of other socio-economic determinants of health," such as being unable to afford to see a doctor or pay for prescription medications.

Another senior nurse denounced the Labour government, saying the offer of 2 percent was "a real slap in the face from the government who we voted in because we believed in them. They're saying, 'We don't want you to have to strike.' But they're not taking any notice of us otherwise."



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