

# New Zealand nurses begin voting on nationwide strikes

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3 May 2018

Nurses, health care assistants and midwives at New Zealand public hospitals began voting on April 23 on a proposal to hold two 24-hour nationwide strikes in July.

The New Zealand Nurses Organisation (NZNO) is dragging the ballot out over four weeks, with the result to be announced at the end of May. It follows protracted negotiations, which began in mid-2017 over a new pay agreement for 27,000 NZNO members.

The members have twice rejected a 2 percent offer, advanced by the union in December and March, which would not have kept pace with soaring costs for housing, petrol and food.

Health workers' pay has effectively been frozen for the past decade, as part of austerity measures imposed by the former National Party government and supported by the entire political establishment, following the 2008 global financial crisis. The health system remains severely underfunded, despite promises to address the crisis by the new Labour Party-led coalition government, installed last October.

Workers are determined, however, to continue their fight for decent wages and conditions. Thousands attended rallies called by the NZNO last month and are planning to join more nationwide protests on May 12. Many have called for a strike.

The union bureaucracy, however, is desperately seeking to prevent any sustained political and industrial campaign against the Labour government. There has been no national nurses' strike since 1989. For decades, the union has suppressed resistance to the running down of the health system under successive governments.

NZNO representatives are continuing negotiations with government and District Health Board representatives as part of a so-called "independent panel." Union spokesperson Cee Payne told the

*Nursing Review* on April 20 that a strike was a "last resort" if a new agreement could not be reached.

While the panel's recommendations are non-binding, the article noted that "NZNO is pencilling in possible 'face-to-face' ratification meetings for June if the bargaining team decides the new offer could meet members' pay and safe staffing concerns." The union leadership has repeatedly refused to put forward a specific pay claim or other demands, such as staffing levels, leaving everything open to negotiation.

Many health workers have demanded an increase of 20 percent or more, strongly criticising the NZNO on the Facebook page "New Zealand, please hear our voice."

On April 18, one contributor, Warwick, said the union should "listen to their members ... serve them and not dictate to them what their outcomes are going to be." Bernadette wrote: "Quite frankly I am fed up with NZNO telling me what I should be thinking, how I should vote."

In another thread, Paula commented: "NZNO do not care about nurses, they are remote from reality and only concerned with themselves." Barbara, a retired nurse, described the NZNO as "out of touch," adding: "For the sake of public health in NZ, you need to look at 'retiring' the tired old NZNO and forming a new union."

The union is fervently promoting the Labour government. Its Facebook page recently celebrated pregnant Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's recent visit to Britain and her meeting with the royal family.

When a commenter asked how this was relevant to the nurses' struggle, a NZNO spokesperson replied: "As a 93% female profession and with the continuation of gender inequity in the workplace, having a female leader who is pregnant is for many a welcome sign of

progress.”

In fact, the prime minister inhabits a different universe from the entire working class, male and female. Her salary is \$471,000, about 10 times the starting salary for a registered nurse.

The government is refusing to keep its election promise to adequately fund the health system. While Labour and its coalition partners oppose any increase in corporate tax, Treasury estimates that at least \$14 billion will be required for new hospitals and upgrades to existing facilities over the next 10 years, while the government has only committed \$10 billion.

Moreover, Health Minister David Clark said last weekend that the Labour Party’s promise to cut the cost of visiting a doctor by \$10 would be delayed, without specifying by how long.

Asked whether nurses should receive “pay equity” with similar male-dominated professions that are more highly paid, Clark replied: “They should be getting pay equity, but there is a process ... to work out how we do that.” He went on to indicate that this was not a priority in the government’s current three-year term.

When a link to the minister’s interview was shared on “New Zealand, please hear our voice,” Trish responded angrily: “What process? Why doesn’t he be honest and say the money isn’t budgeted for?... You’re not fooling anyone David Clark!”

Marie declared: “His comment is why the strike will happen!!” Kal agreed, stating: “Watch how many nurses and midwives walk out after this budget. We have been waiting a long time.”

Around 24 hours later, the link and all comments were deleted, following the deletion, by group administrators, of several critical posts, and of links to *World Socialist Web Site* articles.

The stifling of political discussion on the Facebook page is only assisting the union to impose another rotten sellout. The two administrators, who call themselves “Nurse Florence,” told *Nursing Review* on April 19, “we are supportive of the union’s activities ... [and] have very similar goals.”

The fight for decent wages and conditions can only proceed in a rebellion against the pro-capitalist unions and the entire political establishment.

The Socialist Equality Group calls on all health workers to organise workplace and regional rank-and-file committees, which they control independently of

the union. These committees should reach out to transport workers and other sections of the working class, in New Zealand and internationally, to build the broadest possible industrial and political movement against austerity.

The fight for a high-quality public healthcare system requires a socialist perspective, including the nationalisation of the banks and major corporations under the control of the working class, huge increases in the taxation of the super-rich, and an end to the criminal waste of billions of dollars on militarism and war.



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