

The way forward for New Zealand nurses: Break from the unions! Unite the working class against the Labour government!

Socialist Equality Group (New Zealand)

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The fight by New Zealand nurses and other public hospital workers for decent wages and conditions is in a critical phase. Around 27,000 are voting this month on the New Zealand Nurses Organisation's (NZNO) proposal for two 24 hour strikes in July. These would be the first nationwide strike by nurses in 29 years.

NZNO members have twice rejected a 2 percent wage increase presented to them by the union which would have been outstripped by soaring costs for housing, transport, food and electricity. Wages have been effectively frozen for at least a decade. A registered nurse's starting salary is just \$47,000, about 30 percent lower than in Australia. Many health workers have demanded an increase of around 20 percent.

The nurses' struggle is part of an upsurge of the working class internationally against unceasing attacks on jobs, public services and living standards in the years following the 2008 financial crash. In the US tens of thousands of teachers have joined strikes across several states. Protests and strikes have erupted in many countries in Europe, Latin America and Africa. In the Pacific region health workers recently walked out in New Caledonia, while Tahiti experienced a general strike in February.

Since New Zealand's Labour Party formed a coalition government last October there have been strikes by rail, port and bus workers and protests by midwives and nurses against low pay. Teachers are also demanding significant wage increases.

The urgent task is to unite the entire working class in an industrial and political fight against austerity. This requires a conscious struggle against all the parties in parliament and the trade unions, which have for decades suppressed any resistance to pro-business

restructuring.

The NZNO has no principled opposition to healthcare cuts. It is currently negotiating with the government in a misnamed "independent panel," which aims to avoid a strike and impose a sellout agreement. As in the recent rail disputes in New Zealand and New South Wales, the nurses' union has put forward no specific claim for a pay increase or higher staffing levels, leaving the government to decide what offer it considers "affordable."

Like trade unions throughout the world, the NZNO is led by a privileged bureaucracy with ties to private businesses that benefit from the underfunding of public health. Former NZNO leader Geoff Annals, who is representing the union in the negotiations, is chief executive of the "not for profit" insurer Accuro Health. He also chairs the private health insurance peak body, the Health Funds Association.

The NZNO has promoted illusions in Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, declaring in a Facebook post that "having a female leader who is pregnant is for many a welcome sign of progress."

The notion that a government led by a woman will be more sympathetic to nurses is false. The fundamental division in society is not gender, but class. Ardern, like former Labour Prime Minister Helen Clark, represents the capitalist elite and has nothing in common with working-class women.

The government has no intention of addressing the healthcare crisis. It has refused to raise taxes on corporations and committed to keeping public spending at the same level as the 2008–2017 National Party government. Health Minister David Clark has admitted that more than \$14 billion is needed to repair and build

new hospitals over the next decade, but the government has only committed \$10 billion.

Labour's promise to reduce patient fees for doctor visits by \$10 will be delayed. Clark also indicated nurses will not receive "pay equity" with workers in similar male-dominated jobs in the current term of government.

The government promised to reduce poverty and record homelessness, which have placed great pressure on health services. But instead of building tens of thousands of public houses, the government will spend tens of billions of dollars to upgrade the military and expand the police, in preparation for war and social unrest.

Since the 1980s the public health system has been starved of funding by Labour and National Party governments alike. Public funding as a proportion of total health spending shrank from 88 percent in 1980 to 77 percent by 2010.

The 1984–1990 Labour government of Prime Minister David Lange launched a sweeping pro-market agenda. Taxes were slashed for the wealthy and corporations, while government services, including forestry, rail and telecommunications, were prepared for privatisation, with tens of thousands of job cuts.

Labour closed dozens of hospitals and began privatising aged care. Patient charges were introduced for prescription medicines. Nurses tried to fight back after their wages were frozen, holding their first-ever nationwide strike in February 1989. Then-Health Minister Helen Clark instructed health boards to work within budgets that were being slashed by 3 percent.

Despite widespread public support, after just one 24-hour strike the nurses' union dropped its demand for a \$30 per week pay increase and settled for \$6 to \$12, about 2 percent.

The unions' betrayals paved the way for more hospital closures and other attacks by the 1990s National Party government and the 1999–2008 Labour government of Helen Clark. Private hospitals were expanded, while tens of thousands of people languished on public surgery waiting lists. Labour's promise to "close the gender pay gap" in the public sector, including health, proved to be empty: the gap remained virtually unchanged in 2009.

Health workers are being compelled to organise independently of the pro-capitalist unions. The

Facebook group, "New Zealand, please hear our voice," established in early March by anonymous nurses, called nationwide protests on May 12. Many nurses used the forum to call for a strike and denounce the union bureaucracy.

The group administrators, however, have severely restricted discussion, deleting many comments critical of the NZNO and the Labour Party. They have censored posts of *World Socialist Web Site* articles to prevent nurses from accessing socialist analysis of their struggle.

This attack on the ability of nurses to democratically discuss their dispute is aimed at subordinating them to the union and its perspective of making futile appeals to the government. Group administrators have publicly stated that they have "very similar goals" to the union. On Saturday they will present a petition calling on Ardern to increase healthcare funding, staffing and wages by unspecified amounts.

The Socialist Equality Group calls on health workers to break decisively from the Labour Party, the trade unions and their apologists and establish rank-and-file committees controlled by the workers themselves. These committees will coordinate with other sections of the working class who are coming into struggle against austerity, including workers in Australia, the Pacific and internationally.

This fight requires, above all, a party based on socialism and internationalism. Free, high-quality healthcare is incompatible with capitalism, in which everything is subordinated to the accumulation of private profit. Tens of billions of dollars must be redirected from the military and the rich to expand the health system. The banks and major industries must be nationalised and placed under democratic control.

The SEG urges workers who agree with this perspective to join us.



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