

New Zealand nurses mount nationwide protests

Our reporters
15 May 2018

Thousands of New Zealand nurses, health care assistants, midwives and other workers protested throughout the country on May 12 to demand a wage increase and improved conditions, including more public hospital staff.

Over 500 people rallied in Auckland. A similar number marched to parliament in Wellington. Hundreds more attended in Christchurch, Dunedin and eleven other towns.

The nurses' movement is part of a resurgence of working class struggle internationally against the austerity measures imposed around the world following the 2008 financial crisis that have produced mass redundancies, cuts to essential services and poverty wages.

Significantly, Saturday's protests were coordinated outside of the official union, the New Zealand Nurses Organisation (NZNO), through a Facebook group "New Zealand, please hear our voice," administered by two nurses with the pseudonym Florence Smith. The group has over 45,000 members.

Union members have twice rejected a sellout offer, presented by the union, of a 2 percent pay increase. Many are demanding 18 percent or more, to make up for wages not keeping pace with inflation for more than a decade. Some 27,000 are currently voting on a proposal to hold two strikes in July. NZNO is negotiating with the Labour Party-led government in a desperate attempt to avert strike action and impose a sellout agreement.

Several nurses who addressed the rallies, and others who spoke with members of the Socialist Equality Group (SEG), expressed determination to strike and denounced successive governments for funding cuts to the health sector.

SEG members in Auckland and Wellington

distributed the statement, "The way forward for nurses: Break from the unions! Unite the working class against the Labour government!" It called for the formation of independent rank-and-file workers' committees to organise and broaden the nurses struggle, and for a socialist perspective in opposition to all of the capitalist parties.

The perspective of the protest organisers, however, was to petition the government to increase pay and staffing by an unspecified amount, while subordinating workers to the union. Although nominally independent of the NZNO, the two Florence Smiths have deleted many comments criticising it and the government. They have also censored posts of *World Socialist Web Site* articles and declared that the Facebook group is "not for political debates."

The Labour-led government will announce its budget on Thursday, but has already made clear that it will not address the healthcare crisis. An election promise to reduce patient fees for doctor visits has been delayed. Health Minister David Clark has stated that nurses will not achieve "pay equity" with male-dominated professions during the current term of government.

In a snub to health workers, the Labour Party and its coalition partners New Zealand First and the Greens refused to meet protesters outside parliament to receive the petition, which had over 32,000 signatures. Instead it was handed to Lawrence Yule from the conservative National Party, which spent the last nine years starving hospitals of funding before being removed from office last October. Yule was booed as he feigned sympathy for nurses.

One of the speakers at the Auckland rally was Joe Carolan, from the Unite union and the pseudo-left group Socialist Aotearoa (SA). He declared that "two percent won't pay the rent," without mentioning the

NZNO's attempt to impose this offer.

After heaping praise on "the union movement," Carolan said he was "disappointed" by the absence of politicians at the rally, adding significantly, "I don't trust half of them." During the 2017 election, SA and Unite promoted the fraud that Labour and its leader, Jacinda Ardern, represented a lesser evil to National.

One nurse, Ashia, wrote on "New Zealand, please hear our voice" that "although the march was great, I'm very disappointed in the lack lustre speeches and the Union jumping on the band wagon. This was NOT the platform for a union speech and I thought the organisers lacked clarity and authority in letting unions jump on board." The post was deleted within minutes.

At the Wellington march, a mental health nurse with more than 30 years' experience told WSWS reporters she took part in the last nationwide nurses strike in 1989 and was prepared to strike again. She said, "we've had a lot of changes in our workplace and the unions haven't been as supportive and as active as they could be."

The merger of district health boards in the region had resulted in "more work" and longer hours due to a lack of staff. "We're an ageing workforce," she said. "Our new graduates are going overseas. There's no jobs here for them after training."

Asked how things had changed since 1989, she said "we've been divided and conquered ... Years ago I remember having nurses meetings and we'd have it in a big space with hundreds of nurses."

The NZNO has not called mass stop-work meetings to discuss the contract negotiations, which are being held in secret with the government. The union has made no specific claim for a pay increase.

A younger mental health nurse said a lot of her peers had moved to Australia in search of better conditions. "I have over 50 clients, that's too many for one nurse," she said. "Things just continue piling up, my to-do list never ends."

"I get paid about \$25 an hour, which is around \$5 more than I was getting before I did my three years of undergraduate and one year of postgraduate study. My student loan is about \$80,000."

Asked if she thought negotiations would produce a better deal, she said: "I don't think that we're going to get what we want. Like you guys, I don't have that much faith in government's ability to achieve pay

equity for us and other professions."

Moira told the WSWS: "I have voted to strike. It's quite sad to see that every country's taking the same trend, not treating their nurses very well. I've left Ireland and I've left England due to these reasons. It's sad to see it happening here now as well.

"I work in the Hutt Valley. We face a shortage of staff and we're being overworked. It leads to burnout. It's a worldwide trend. I don't think nurses are well-paid anywhere. We need to stand up for ourselves more."

She said nurses deserved to be paid as much as police officers, who start on \$62,000 in wages and benefits—about \$13,000 more than a registered nurse.



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