

New Zealand nurses vote for nationwide strike

Tom Peters
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The New Zealand Nurses Organisation (NZNO) reported on Monday that a majority of its 27,000 members in public hospitals voted in favour of a nationwide strike.

The union did not reveal how many voted for and against. There is widespread anger among nurses, healthcare assistants and hospital midwives, who have twice rejected a 2 percent pay rise offer, which the NZNO trade union itself recommended last December and in March.

On May 12, nurses organised nationwide protests in 15 towns and cities, independently of the union, through the Facebook group “New Zealand, please hear our voice.” Many nurses have demanded an pay increase of 18 percent or more, and a much higher ratio of staff to patients.

The nurses’ movement is part of an upsurge of working-class struggle internationally against attacks on wages and conditions and other austerity measures imposed since the 2008 financial crisis. In New Zealand, workers are coming into conflict with the Labour Party-led coalition government. The Labour Party promised in last year’s election to address the crisis of understaffed and under-resourced hospitals, but is continuing to starve the health system of funds.

On Monday afternoon, in an attempt to avert strike action, the country’s District Health Boards (DHBs) made a revised pay offer of 6 percent this year, plus 3 percent next year, and one-off payments of \$2,000. The DHBs also offered \$32 million to increase staffing by about 2 percent. The NZNO told health workers it would issue its assessment of the offer on Thursday.

Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern told Newstalk ZB she hoped health workers would accept the offer and the strike would be called off. Finance Minister Grant Robertson declared: “The government doesn’t have a

bottomless pit of money here.”

In fact, the government has refused to raise taxes on the rich and corporations, and committed to spending billions on the military, police and prisons.

The DHBs’ spokesperson, Helen Mason, misleadingly told the media that under the new offer “the salary of a Registered Nurse with five years’ experience will go up by around \$10,500 over 18 months... By December 2019, the average take home pay of a full-time experienced Registered Nurse will be around \$93,000 a year.”

In reality, a nurse with five years’ experience currently earns around \$68,000, before tax. Mason’s figures presuppose a large amount of weekend work or overtime. On the “New Zealand, please hear our voice,” nurses described the DHBs’ statements—which have been echoed by the media—as “propaganda,” “fake news” and “deliberately misleading the public.” Many called for a strike.

Miri commented: “Most nurses with 5+ years experience will be on \$77k by Dec 2019. This brings them in line with teachers’ payrates today, and teachers are about to go into negotiations so nurses will fall behind again... It’s not enough.” Teachers are calling for an increase of around 15 percent this year.

Another nurse, Cheryl, wrote: “Don’t forget our contract ended in 2017 and this goes to 2020, so 3 percent a year only just keeps pace with inflation, maybe a bit over. But as we have for the last 10 years not kept up with inflation we won’t break even.” said nsaid nurses would not achieve equity with nurses in Australia, whom she said were paid at least 17 percent more.urses would not achieve equity with nurses in Australia, whom she said were paid at least 17 percent more.

Nurses confront not only the government and DHBs

but also the trade union bureaucracy, which has colluded for decades to suppress opposition to attacks on the health system by Labour and National Party governments alike. No nationwide nurses' strike has broken out since 1989. The NZNO has scheduled two 24-hour stoppages in mid-July, but repeatedly stated that it wants to reach a deal with the DHBs and call off the strikes.

The DHBs' offer is based on a recommendation made last week by an "independent panel" that includes representatives of the government, the DHBs and NZNO. On May 24, a NZNO press release said the panel's recommendation of three pay increases of 3 percent "falls short," but added: "NZNO members will be pleased" with 2 percent more staff.

The proposed staffing increase is grossly inadequate. In February, Auckland DHB officials told a parliamentary committee that hospitals in the country's largest city were operating with resources based on the 2013 census, even though the population has since grown by 17 percent. Auckland's Middlemore Hospital reportedly spent much of last winter with an occupancy rate of up to 170 percent.

Dozens of nurses criticised NZNO via Facebook on "New Zealand, please hear our voice." One anonymous post on May 24 asked: "Are there any NZNO members who are pleased with this outcome?" Laura replied: "It's disgusting and disappointing. Where are they getting this 'our members will be pleased' rubbish from?"

Tarsha added: "Unbelievable that these people are supposed to be advocating for us and this is what they come up with?! Have they not been listening to a word we've been saying?" Angela asked: "So is there agreement that we are wasting our money paying union fees to NZNO?"

These and several other comments were deleted by the Facebook group's administrators within two days. The administrators—two anonymous nurses known as Florence Smith and a third, Danni Wilkinson—are nominally independent of the NZNO, but support the union bureaucracy. On the pretext of maintaining "unity," they have severely restricted criticism of the union's role and banned all posts of *World Socialist Web Site* articles.

The WSWs warns that such censorship will assist the NZNO as it seeks to sabotage the nurses' struggle and

impose a sellout deal. The only way forward is for health workers to break from the union and build new, rank-and-file committees that they control themselves. These must forge links with other sections of workers, including teachers and transport workers, who are coming into struggle in New Zealand and globally.

Workers can be united against the Labour government's pro-business agenda only if they rebel against the unions and base themselves on a socialist and internationalist strategy. A high-quality public health service, freely accessible to all, with decent working conditions, pay and staffing levels, is incompatible with the capitalist profit system that Labour and the unions defend.



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