Vote no to sellout of New Zealand nurses! Build rank-and-file committees!

The Socialist Equality Group (New Zealand)
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The struggle of New Zealand hospital workers for decent wages and conditions is at a crossroads. This week and next, 27,000 public hospital nurses, midwives and healthcare assistants are voting on an offer from District Health Boards (DHBs) to increase pay by 9 percent over two years and slightly raise staffing levels.

The offer was made in a desperate attempt to avoid a strike, for which nurses voted last month after rejecting two previous pay offers of 2 percent presented by DHBs and the New Zealand Nurses Organisation (NZNO).

The revised deal is falsely portrayed as a generous offer by the Labour Party government and corporate media. In fact, it does not make up for a decade-long effective wage freeze and is grossly inadequate given the scale of the crisis facing public hospital staff.

The Socialist Equality Group (SEG) calls on health workers to decisively reject this sellout, organise independently of the union bureaucracy and prepare for a nationwide strike. The SEG warns that the two 24-hour strikes foreshadowed by the NZNO for July are deliberately limited in scope and designed only to let off steam.

Workers' demands cannot be constrained by what the government and ruling elite deem "affordable." Appeals must be made to other sections of the working class in New Zealand and internationally to combine their strength in a political and industrial campaign for the basic social right of all people to high-quality, free health care—provided by the necessary number of well-paid doctors, nurses and other medical professionals.

The nurses' fight is part of a global upsurge of the class struggle, including strikes by teachers in the United States and Latin America, truck drivers in Brazil, rail workers in France and Sri Lanka, and bank workers in India, and repeated general strikes in Greece.

New Zealand nurses' wages increased by 19 percent over the past decade, while housing costs soared 62.9 percent. The weekly median rent in Auckland almost doubled from $280 in 2008 to $550 this year, while the starting salary for a registered nurse increased by just $127 a week. On social media, many nurses have demanded an increase of 18 percent or more.

The proposed 2 percent increase in staffing is insulting. It equates to just 500 workers, divided among 20 districts, which will not make up for attrition. A Nursing Council study published in 2015 revealed that 7 percent of nurses left the profession after one year and 41 percent were no longer nursing in New Zealand eight years after registering. Many moved overseas, seeking better pay and conditions.

Hospitals are extremely overcrowded and patients are being placed at risk. Auckland DHB told the government in February that in the past five years the city's population grew 9.4 percent, emergency department admissions increased 18.8 percent and in-patient discharges rose by 15 percent. Hospital operating budgets, however, have been frozen. Health workers simply cannot cope with the pressures they are under.

The draft agreement contains no mandatory staff-to-patients ratio. Many nurses have demanded a legally binding ratio of one nurse-to-four patients.

There is widespread anger at the DHBs' offer and determination to strike. In a Facebook poll posted on May 28, in the nurses' group "New Zealand, please hear our voice," more than 3,350 people opposed the deal and only 40 were in favour.

It is not accidental that health workers have taken a stand against the government. They are directly exposed to the social crisis produced by decades of pro-business restructuring by Labour and National Party governments alike.

Hospitals in rural areas have been closed; every year thousands of people are denied essential surgery; and mental health and poverty-related hospital admissions

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have soared. A two-class system exists. The wealthy can always get the best care money can buy via the private health sector. The working class in contrast only has access to the dysfunctional public system, operated by under-paid, under-staffed and over-worked nurses, doctors and ancillary workers.

After falsely promising during the 2017 election to address the crisis in health, education and housing, the Labour Party and its coalition partners, the Greens and New Zealand First, are continuing the austerity regime of the previous National government. Social services are being starved while taxes for the rich and corporations are kept down.

The urgent task facing health workers is to forge links with other workers—particularly teachers, who are demanding a 16 percent pay increase, and transport workers who have waged a series of strikes—to spearhead a campaign against the Labour government and the business elite.

Such a struggle requires a rebellion against the trade union bureaucracy, which has colluded for decades with National and Labour Party governments to divide and suppress the working class.

The NZNO leadership claims to be neither for nor against the DHBs' proposal, while portraying it in bright colours. A union bulletin hailed the meagre staffing increase as "a very positive response to our claim for immediate remedies to provide safe staffing and healthy workplaces." Another union "fact sheet" falsely described the Labour government as "fully committed to pay equity."

In fact, Health Minister David Clark told the media that female nurses will not be granted equity with similar male-dominated professions in the current term of government. The 1999-2008 Labour Party government of Prime Minister Helen Clark made empty promises of "pay equity," which the unions similarly promoted.

Health workers must demand mass stopwork meetings to democratically discuss and debate the proposed agreement. The NZNO is seeking to prevent such a discussion by holding hundreds of small "ratification meetings" in hospitals. At Auckland City Hospital alone, more than 40 meetings are scheduled. The aim is to divide workers and apply as much pressure as possible to accept the deal.

The union bureaucracy is part of a privileged upper middle class layer, which has a material interest in the defence of the status quo and opposes any struggle for social change. The Council of Trade Unions is currently working with the government and business leaders to design a framework that will outlaw strikes during industry-wide "fair pay" negotiations.

Nurses have been compelled to organise independently of NZNO, through the Facebook group "New Zealand, please hear our voice," which was established by two nurses and last month organised nationwide protests. Teachers in the United States have similarly organised strikes and rallies through social media in recent months, frequently in opposition to the unions.

The group's administrators, however, have expressed support for the NZNO and imposed a ban on what they call "union bashing." Many comments critical of the union have been deleted, as well as links to *World Socialist Web Site* articles. The aim is to shackle workers to the union bureaucracy and the Labour government.

Health workers must be able to democratically debate the way forward in their struggle without being censored or intimidated.

The Socialist Equality Group calls for the formation of new organisations: rank-and-file committees controlled by workers themselves. Once the movement for decent health services, wages and conditions is taken out of the hands of the unions, it will win ever-greater support and set a powerful example for other workers.

Workers can only succeed to the extent that they base their fight on a conscious socialist and internationalist strategy, opposed to the entire political establishment. The tens of billions of dollars needed to provide free, high-quality public health services must be obtained by redistributing the wealth currently wasted on military spending, or hoarded by the super-rich, the banks, and major corporations.

We call on workers who agree with this perspective to contact us.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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