

New Zealand nurses reject third sellout deal, prepare to strike

Tom Peters
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The New Zealand Nurses Organisation (NZNO) announced on June 18 that 29,000 nurses, midwives and healthcare assistants in public hospitals across the country had voted to “strongly reject” the latest pay offer from the District Health Boards (DHBs) and the Labour Party government.

Two days later, the union officially gave notice that a nationwide 24-hour strike will go ahead on July 5. Health workers also approved a second strike on July 12.

The rejected proposal included a pay increase of 6 percent plus 3 percent next year, a \$2,000 lump sum and a 2 percent increase in staffing. In late 2017 and March 2018 the DHBs made offers of a 2 percent pay increase, which workers rebuffed.

The third offer, which the government, the media and the NZNO attempted to portray in bright colours, did not address the crisis in the country’s grossly underfunded healthcare system. For at least a decade, nurses’ wages have been effectively frozen, while living costs have soared. Hospitals are dangerously understaffed and overcrowded, and thousands of people are missing out on essential treatment.

The nurses’ dispute is part of an intensifying class struggle internationally against austerity measures imposed since the 2008 financial crisis. Recently millions of truck drivers went on strike in India; there have been mass strikes in Iran, Greece, and other parts of Europe, and by hundreds of thousands of American teachers. Nurses in California are also seeking to fight back against low wages and poor conditions.

In New Zealand, primary teachers are currently voting on whether to strike after being offered a pay increase of between 2.2 and 2.6 percent per annum for three years. Teachers want a 16 percent raise. More than 4,000 public servants in the Inland Revenue

Department and Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment voted on June 18 to take industrial action over low pay and “performance-based” systems. Fast food, bus and train workers have all taken strike action in recent weeks.

Workers are coming into direct conflict with the Labour-NZ First-Greens coalition government, which is continuing the austerity regime of the previous National Party government.

Acting Prime Minister Winston Peters, leader of the right-wing populist NZ First Party, was visibly nervous at a press conference following the nurses’ vote. He declared: “We won’t be able to fix all the problems [in the health system] in just one pay round. It takes time to fix neglect ... This government will exercise fiscal constraint.”

Health Minister David Clark insisted the offer would not be increased, saying it “really is the extent of what is available.”

The corporate media backed the government, with right-wing radio and TV host Mike Hosking stating: “There is no more money on the table for the nurses. And I congratulate [Finance Minister] Grant Robertson and David Clark for saying so.” A *Dominion Post* editorial declared that nurses “risk being seen as greedy for forcefully making their point.”

In October 2017, announcing NZ First’s coalition deal with Labour, Peters warned of growing anti-capitalist sentiment and said the new government would restore “capitalism with a human face.” This has been exposed as a fraud.

The government is committed to keeping overall spending below 30 percent of gross domestic product, like the previous National government. It has ruled out increasing taxes on the wealthy and corporations to fund health and other services. Hundreds of millions of

dollars are being spent on the military to prepare for war, and on the police and prison system.

The government's priorities are shown in its promise to recruit 1,800 extra police officers, compared with only 500 more nurses for the country's 84 public hospitals.

Health workers have shown their determination to strike for a better deal. The NZNO, however, supports the Labour government and is desperate to shut down the developing movement. In a June 18 statement, the union called for "urgent mediation," saying it "remains committed to working with DHBs to find a resolution to this impasse and avoid strike action." The result of mediation will be announced next week.

The union bureaucracy has not approved nationwide strike action since a one-day stoppage 29 years ago, despite major attacks on the health sector, including the growth of surgery waiting lists and expansion of private hospitals. NZNO has a close relationship with private company Accuro Health Insurance, whose chief executive is former NZNO leader Geoff Annals.

There is growing anger toward the NZNO, which has so far presented three sell-out pay deals. In an article on the *Nursing Review* website on June 6, emergency nurse practitioner Michael Geraghty wrote that the union is "known for its conservative, 'let's not make a fuss' approach, to well, everything."

Geraghty denounced the union's refusal to make a specific wage claim going into negotiations. He noted that nurses "pay \$15 million a year to NZNO in membership fees" and questioned whether nurses got their "money's worth." Geraghty concluded that the Facebook group started by nurses in March "has done more to energise nurses; to raise awareness of our plight than NZNO has done in the past ten years."

Many nurses have posted in the group, "New Zealand, please hear our voice," explaining their demands, which have been ignored by the union. An anonymous post on June 18, which has more than 500 likes, called for a pay increase of 20 percent over two years, "a nurse to patient ratio of 1:4 for acute surgical/medical wards," and "pay equity" with similar, male-dominated professions.

The group's administrators, however, have deleted criticism of the NZNO and posts of *World Socialist Web Site* articles, on the pretext of preserving "unity." In fact, the continued subordination of workers to the

union bureaucracy will guarantee the isolation of the nurses' struggle and further erosion of working conditions.

The urgent task is to unite health workers with teachers and other sections of the working class in a common struggle against the Labour-NZ First-Green coalition government. This requires a political rebellion against the pro-capitalist unions and the establishment of new rank-and-file committees that workers themselves control.

Health workers should reject the lie that there is "no money" available for high quality, free and accessible hospital care, delivered by well-paid nurses, doctors, midwives and healthcare assistants. Tens of billions of dollars must be redistributed from the super-rich, the banks, the military and the police to fund health, education and other vital services. This requires a unified fight for a workers' government to implement socialist policies.



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