Outrage over union's cancellation of New Zealand nurses' strike

Tom Peters
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In a blatantly anti-democratic move, the New Zealand Nurses' Organisation (NZNO) last Friday cancelled a 24-hour nationwide strike scheduled for July 5—one of two strikes endorsed by a strong majority of the union's 29,000 members in public hospitals, including nurses, midwives and healthcare assistants.

The NZNO said it would recommend a revised pay offer from the government's District Health Boards (DHBs), following the rejection of three previous offers by health workers since late 2017. The NZNO is scrambling to ram through the sellout deal before July 12, when the second strike is scheduled.

Union leaders withheld details of the new offer for three days, keeping workers in the dark while the corporate media celebrated the cancellation of the strike and Acting Prime Minister Winston Peters hailed the "breakthrough" agreement.

On Monday afternoon, health workers discovered that the new offer is virtually identical to one they decisively rejected last month. There is no extra money from the government, meaning that most NZNO members will still receive the same 9 percent pay increase spread over two years.

The new draft agreement includes a vague promise that health workers must achieve "pay equity" with similar male-dominated jobs by the end of 2019, but there is no guarantee that this will result in a meaningful pay increase.

The total number of nurses will be increased by a grossly inadequate 500, or 2 percent. By contrast, the Labour Party-NZ First-Greens coalition government has promised to recruit 1800 extra police officers.

Hospital staff are at breaking point after a pay freeze that has lasted at least a decade. Overcrowding and understaffing have reached crisis levels. In Auckland, resourcing of the public health system is based on 2013 population figures, even though hospital admissions have soared by more than 15 percent since then. The aging population, and increase in poverty-related admissions, have placed extraordinary pressure on the system.

Voting on the proposed agreement will take place from July 3 to July 9. In a press conference on Monday, Peters urged nurses to accept it, saying: "we've only got so much money to run a fiscally responsible budget." This was echoed by NZNO spokesperson Cee Payne, who declared, "there is no additional funding that can be gained through taking industrial action at this point in time."

In the Facebook group "New Zealand, please hear our voice," run by a handful of nurses, hundreds of comments expressed outrage at the NZNO's cancellation of the July 5 strike and its attempt to impose yet another betrayal. The group's administrators support the NZNO and have deleted many comments, as well as *World Socialist Web Site* articles exposing the union, but they have been unable to prevent the outpouring of anger over the union's collusion with the government and DHBs.

Nurses have previously used the group to organise protests and to publish demands, which NZNO has ignored, for a pay increase of around 20 percent and a guaranteed ratio of one nurse to four patients.

Megan wrote: "I am fuming! Safe staffing has not been addressed at all!… NZNO you should be ASHAMED of yourself!!" She noted that the $38 million allocated to hire more nurses was just over a third of the $100 million in government funding for Auckland to host the 2021 Americas Cup yacht race.

Luanne said sarcastically: "Thanks for the great support and drive NZNO. Can NOT believe you thought this [offer] was worth cancelling a strike and

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generating a vote."

Jayne asked: "Do the NZNO think it's members are stupid, I'm disgusted in this offer that they are recommending."

A lengthy comment by Auckland nurse Siobhan Lehnhard, which received more than 800 likes, said: "We are right to be angry. We are right to be furious … If our union won't fight for us then we'll take it back."

A poll in the Facebook group has so far had more than 1700 people oppose the deal, with just 146 in favour and 269 undecided.

The incipient rebellion against the NZNO poses urgent political issues for health workers and others, including teachers, who are coming into struggle against the government's austerity regime. Internationally, there has been a wave of strikes and class struggles in recent months, including mass protests in Britain against cuts to the National Health Service. Increasingly, as in the mass teachers' strikes in the United States, workers are being driven to organise themselves through social media, independently of the trade unions.

Like other unions, the NZNO cannot be "taken back" or forced to serve the interests of its members. It is controlled by a privileged upper middle class bureaucracy, which is organically hostile to any independent struggle by the working class. According to its last financial statement, there are 28 union officials paid more than $100,000 a year, around twice the salary of the average nurse.

Under successive Labour and National Party governments, NZNO has suppressed any resistance to cuts in the health sector. There has not been a nationwide nurses strike since 1989, despite waves of hospital closures, wage freezes and systemic underfunding of healthcare.

Health workers should decisively reject the new sellout offer, in defiance of the NZNO, the corporate media and the government. This stand will set a powerful example for other workers.

To broaden the offensive against the government's austerity regime, new organisations must be formed: rank-and-file committees, democratically controlled by health workers themselves. These committees must forge links with different sections of workers, in New Zealand and internationally, to coordinate the broadest possible industrial and political campaign against austerity.

For this to take place, workers must make a conscious political break from the Labour government of Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, who is falsely promoted as progressive by the unions and the media. Above all, workers need a new party, based on a socialist and internationalist program.

The claim by the government and NZNO that there is no money for a well-funded public health system is a lie. The tens of billions of dollars urgently needed to upgrade hospitals, and hire thousands more nurses, doctors and other health workers on decent wages, are being wasted on the military, prisons, police and intelligence agencies, and on tax breaks for the country's billionaires.

The wealth hoarded by the super-rich must be redistributed through a major increase in their taxation and the nationalisation of banks and major industries, under the democratic control of the working class. This requires the socialist reorganisation of society. Vital public services such as healthcare are incompatible with capitalism, where everything is subordinate to the drive to profit. This perspective is advanced only by the Socialist Equality Group, and we urge health workers who agree with it to contact us.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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