

New Zealand nurses speak to WSWS opposing sellout deal

Tom Peters
7 July 2018

Nurses, healthcare assistants and midwives at public hospitals throughout New Zealand are voting until July 9 on a sellout offer recommended by the New Zealand Nurses Organisation (NZNO).

The offer was announced after NZNO cancelled a strike scheduled for July 5, which had been endorsed by a strong majority of union members. The union bureaucracy is collaborating with the Labour Party government and District Health Boards (DHBs) to impose an agreement that maintains poor pay and conditions, as well as severe under-staffing of hospitals.

Two nurses spoke to the WSWS on condition of anonymity, explaining why they were voting against the new version of the agreement, which is virtually the same as the one rejected in a majority vote of NZNO members last month.

A nurse working in **Northland**, one of the poorest regions in the country, said: “Everybody feels betrayed by NZNO.” She described the union as “ineffectual, not representing nursing’s best interests, and they have caved in under the bullying tactics of the DHBs.”

She denounced the “absolute distortion” of the offer by the DHBs, which initially told the media senior nurses could earn \$93,000 a year. This could only be achieved, she said, by a nurse working “predominantly night duty, every weekend, and every public holiday.” For the majority of NZNO members the deal means an increase of 9 percent for the period 2017-2019, a little above inflation.

The nurse explained that getting paid for overtime was already “like trying to get blood from a stone” and nurses in her hospital had been told to “do more with less.” Because nurses were so overworked, they often had no time to fill out incident reports, meaning serious incidents such as harassment by patients, bullying, and clinical errors were under-reported, she said.

She described the proposed agreement’s provision for 500 extra hospital staff throughout the country as “garbage,” adding: “You look across the 20 DHBs, where do you think [500 is] going to go? It’s going to go nowhere. Where are they going to get them from? Nurses are not going to come here if their salary and conditions are crap.”

The nurse pointed out that there is a “continual cycle” of nurses moving overseas: “I know of 20 nurses that have left this hospital and are now in Australia and some of them are senior, experienced nurses.”

Describing conditions in her hospital, she said: “Sometimes one nurse on night duty is looking after seven patients. In another area with really acute patients, sometimes one nurse is looking after five. So the nurse-to-patient ratio here is utterly appalling. The acuity and the number of presentations to the emergency department is going up all the time. We’re very often overwhelmed.”

Many nurses have used social media to demand a ratio of one nurse to four patients.

The Northland-based nurse explained that many patients presented to hospital emergency departments because general practices were fully booked, or they could not afford to see a doctor. In addition, “we have the problem of an ageing population that are not being looked after adequately in rest homes. The rest homes are full of carers who are poorly qualified. The registered nurses there have an enormous workload, so they’re just sending people [to hospitals].”

She pointed out that despite having many years’ experience, she would not progress to the top pay grade, level 7, until 2020 under the current offer. “That’s at the DHB’s discretion. So if they don’t like me, they can say, well, we won’t grant you level 7. That is just completely wrong.”

“I think we have to have parity with teachers,” she said. Primary school teachers have called for a 16 percent pay increase this year.

A nurse based in **Auckland**, with 15 years’ experience, told the WSWS that she and some colleagues had staged a small rally on July 5, the day the strike was meant to have gone ahead.

“The public was phenomenal,” she said. “We had trains tooting, we had busses tooting, we had cars, so much public support, it was amazing. That’s enough to keep us going.”

She believed the government should fund healthcare by “taxing the people who earn over \$100,000. If you go back to basics, it’s healthcare, education and housing. New Zealand needs to spend billions of dollars on these. The rich get richer and there’s that poor middle class that just can’t get anything. There’s money, they just have to spend it wisely.”

She noted that the government had recently announced \$850 million to address a virus affecting cattle farms, New Zealand’s main export industry, while claiming there is no more available for nurses.

“Nurses, HCAs [healthcare assistants], midwives and enrolled nurses deserve more. Inflation is 2 percent and they’re offering 3 percent a year,” she said.

She criticised a vague promise in the proposed agreement that nurses will achieve “pay equity” with similar male-dominated jobs. There is no guarantee this will result in a meaningful wage increase. “By the time pay equity comes in, in 2019, who knows what that will be. You’ve got to fight for it now and you’ve got to fight for the public.”

The Auckland nurse said on night shifts at her hospital there was often a ratio of one nurse to 10 or 11 patients. “You should have one nurse to three cardiac patients and one nurse to six patients at night time,” she said.

While not wanting to comment on NZNO’s handling of the dispute, she stated: “I don’t believe the strike should have been cancelled until we saw the offer. You can’t organise a strike and then say, ‘don’t worry, we’re going to give you a better offer,’ then cancel the strike. They should have allowed people to vote. If we didn’t like the offer, we should have struck.”

The nurse felt let down by the Labour Party-led government, which contested last year’s election with a promise to address the crisis in the healthcare system.

Pointing to the high rate of population growth, she asked: “If you don’t give us more hospitals, if you don’t give us more wards, if you don’t give us more staff, how are we meant to cope? They need to put more money into the healthcare for the people of New Zealand. It’s clear in my book.”



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact