

New Zealand nurses reject union-backed sellout, prepare nationwide strike

Tom Peters
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The New Zealand Nurses Organisation (NZNO) announced today that a majority of its 29,500 members in public hospitals had voted to reject the latest offer from District Health Boards (DHBs), backed by the NZNO. The union did not reveal the voting figures.

This highly significant vote paves the way for the first nationwide 24-hour strike since 1989. It is scheduled for Thursday, and involves nurses, midwives and healthcare assistants.

The union bureaucracy recommended the sellout agreement after cancelling a strike scheduled for July 5—a flagrantly anti-democratic move that was widely denounced by nurses on Facebook. The offer, the fourth presented to NZNO members since late 2017, was virtually identical to an offer decisively rejected last month: a pay increase of 3 percent per annum for 2017-2019 and a grossly inadequate 2 percent increase in hospital staffing.

Last week NZNO desperately sought to promote the offer and echoed the Labour Party-NZ First-Greens coalition government's false statements that there was no more money available.

In rejecting the sellout, hospital staff have courageously defied the government and the NZNO leadership. Nurses and other health workers are unable to cope under their current working conditions, after more than a decade of drastic understaffing and an effective wage freeze, enforced by the union.

Other sections of workers are also beginning to fight back against austerity. Yesterday 4,000 public servants at the Inland Revenue Department and the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment held a two-hour strike for improved pay and conditions. Primary school teachers are also likely to strike, after rejecting a pay offer of less than 3 percent. Bus drivers, rail workers and fast food workers have all taken industrial action in

recent months.

This is part of an international upsurge of the working class, including mass strikes by teachers in the United States, public sector workers and others across Europe, and transport workers in India and Brazil.

In a press conference, NZNO leaders announced that the government's Employment Relations Authority had ordered them to return to talks with DHBs today, in a last-ditch attempt to reach a new agreement and call off the strike. While saying workers would only accept an agreement if more money were offered, NZNO spokesperson Cee Payne told reporters "we haven't quantified" how much additional funding would be acceptable to the union negotiators.

Acting Prime Minister Winston Peters bluntly told the media the government was "very, very disappointed ... We haven't been joking when we told the nurses that this is our best offer ... It's not that we're not willing to—we haven't got the money."

This is a bald-faced lie. Just yesterday the Labour-led government approved the purchase of four new Air Force Poseidon patrol planes, at a total cost of \$2.3 billion, four times the amount set aside for health workers. The sum is part of a total \$20 billion commitment by the previous National Party government to upgrade the military and improve its inter-operability with allies such as the US and Australia.

On the NZNO's Facebook page, Jenny wrote: "One less plane for the air force should put money for more nurses in the coffers." In the group "New Zealand, please hear our voice," which is run by nurses, Kirsty said, "If only Winston [Peters] would announce 2.3 billion for the nurses."

As well as preparing for war, the government has promised to recruit 1,800 extra police officers,

compared to just 500 hospital staff. It has also committed to keeping taxes low for companies and the rich, while capping overall spending at 30 percent of gross domestic product—the same as the previous conservative National Party government.

The acting prime minister told the media “there’s still time to avert industrial action” and urged NZNO and DHBs to reach an agreement. He added: “there are thousands of nurses who don’t want to go on strike, we just hope that they’re the majority come Thursday.”

In “New Zealand, please hear our voice,” Haidee wrote: “Not counting on the strike just yet, considering last week’s cancellation [of the July 5 strike] without consulting members.” Chanelle predicted: “They will find some way out of it again. I will be so pissed if they do! But I can see it happening.”

Other comments raised that the legal requirement for nurses to provide minimal “life preserving services” (LPS) during a strike was being interpreted far too broadly. Danny wrote: “The union has appeared weak and easily bullied by DHBs and this has been especially obvious with negotiations around providing LPS.”

One nurse told the WSWs: “The LPS is a joke. Some of the lists of LPS looked like a full job description. The DHBs have meddled to make the whole strike action as ineffectual as possible. While nobody wants to harm patients, some areas are staffed better than normal rostering.”

Another nurse said: “I hope the industrial action goes ahead ... A lot of people are saying, ‘don’t come back to us if you can’t give us more money.’ The government needs to put more money into the healthcare system and more staff. Five hundred more staff across the country can’t be measured unless they implement nurse-to-patient ratios.”

Many nurses have demanded a ratio of one nurse to four patients, to address the dangerous levels of understaffing at hospitals, which has led to thousands of people missing out on vital treatment. This, along with the widespread demand for a wage increase of 18-20 percent, has been ignored by NZNO.

The Socialist Equality Group warns that if the health workers’ movement is left in the hands of the NZNO bureaucracy, it will be sold out.

In a revealing exchange during today’s press conference, NZNO chief executive Memo Musa was asked whether the union was “willing to compromise.”

He replied: “We’ve compromised quite a lot: 10 years of underfunding, 10 years of low wage increases, 10 years of DHBs not fulfilling their commitments around safe staffing, and that’s taken a toll.”

In other words, the union bureaucracy took responsibility for imposing austerity measures throughout the health sector and for suppressing any resistance from workers. Housing, food, transport and other living costs soared while wages were frozen. Like teachers in the United States, NZ health workers have been compelled to organise independently, largely through Facebook, in order to discuss their demands and organise protests.

Preparations must be made, independently of NZNO, to ensure that Thursday’s strike goes ahead and is not sabotaged by the DHBs or the union. Health workers must form new organisations: rank-and-file committees that they control democratically, to fight for the broadest possible political and industrial campaign against the government’s underfunding of the health system. They must take responsibility to reach out to paramedics, doctors and others in the health sector, as well as teachers and other workers who are coming into struggle—in New Zealand, Australia, Britain and many other countries—for a unified fight of the working class against austerity.

Above all, the fight for a well-funded and accessible public health system requires a socialist perspective. Everywhere, capitalist governments tell workers there is “no more money” for health, education and other basic services, while dishing out billions for war and tax breaks for the wealthy. These resources must be redirected to healthcare and all essential social services.

The Socialist Equality Group is hosting an online forum this **Saturday, July 14, at 4:00p.m.** to discuss this perspective and the way forward for health workers. We urge all health workers to join this critical discussion. [Click here to register.](#)



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