

Open letter to NZ nurses' Facebook group: Reverse the ban on WSWWS articles and criticisms of the union

Socialist Equality Group (New Zealand)

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The *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) and the Socialist Equality Group (New Zealand) call on the administrators of the nurses' and health workers' Facebook group "New Zealand, please hear our voice," to immediately lift their ban on posting WSWWS articles and censorship of criticism of the New Zealand Nurses Organisation (NZNO).

The page must allow free discussion on the way forward for nurses in their fight for increased pay, staffing and working conditions. This necessarily includes scrutiny of the role of the NZNO in attempting to suppress this growing movement.

The ban was imposed on Tuesday night. Earlier that day, NZNO leaders announced that a majority of its 29,500 members in public hospitals had voted against a union-backed sellout agreement with District Health Boards. This had followed the rejection of an almost identical offer the previous week when, against the wishes of their members, the union had called off a strike scheduled for July 5 and tried, unsuccessfully, to avoid today's strike.

Health workers defied pressure from the union bureaucracy, the Labour Party-led government and the media to accept the deal, which maintained grossly inadequate staffing levels and a pay rise of just 3 percent a year for most members for 2017-2019.

At this critical point, the administrators of "New Zealand, please hear our voice" (NZPHOV), who go by the pseudonym Florence Smith, stepped in to try and halt the incipient rebellion against the NZNO. They deleted at least three posts of WSWWS articles in the group, along with hundreds of comments and posts criticising the union's role.

Shortly afterwards a statement was posted by the

"Nurse Florence Team" praising the NZNO "for hearing our voices and for supporting us."

It stated in part: "We see on our page that some comments are reflecting unhappiness with the NZNO. Today is not the day to be hypercritical of the NZNO. There is work to be done, we need to draw together and not divide at this critical time. Today is not a day to be working against the NZNO, they are our negotiation team whether you like it or not." Commenting on the post was disabled.

The Socialist Equality Group calls this for what it is: censorship of free speech in the service of a privileged union bureaucracy whose aim is to impose a sellout on health workers. This was done two days before a nationwide strike, when the broadest discussion is essential if workers are to develop their struggle against the government's ongoing underfunding of health and other services.

NZPHOV administrators must allow WSWWS articles to be posted so that workers can read and discuss our perspective. We warn that the suppression of free discussion on behalf of the NZNO will help to prepare a betrayal. Health workers must be allowed to voice their opinions freely and without censorship.

The claim that criticism of the NZNO must be suppressed to preserve "unity" among workers is false and absurd.

The NZPHOV group was established in March and rapidly gained more than 45,000 members precisely because it provided a forum, independent of the union, for health workers to discuss the appalling conditions they face and how to fight back. The group became an organising centre for nationwide protests held in May. Its members have called for a pay increase of 20

percent and staffing ratios of one nurse to four patients. The group attracted support from other sections of workers in New Zealand and, significantly, from Australia and other countries.

One nurse wrote on the *Nursing Review* website on June 6 that NZPHOV “has done more to energise nurses; to raise awareness of our plight than NZNO has done in the past ten years.”

The NZNO, far from supporting workers, has been the chief obstacle to building a unified movement of health and other workers against austerity. It has sought to suppress discussion of four sellout agreements presented since late last year, refusing to hold mass meetings where nurses could debate the offers and challenge the union leadership. In calling off the July 5 strike, union leaders completely disregarded their members’ democratic vote.

Nurses’ wages have been suppressed and hospitals drastically under-funded for more than a decade as part of austerity measures supported by the National Party, the Labour Party and the union bureaucracy. The NZNO suppressed resistance to these conditions, which have led to thousands of people missing out on vital medical treatment.

Union leaders echoed the government’s lie that there is no more money for decent health services—even as the government announced \$750 million to expand the Waikeria prison and \$2.3 billion to purchase four new planes for the military.

Today’s nationwide strike, the first by nurses since 1989, has proceeded in defiance of the union, largely because workers were able to use Facebook to discuss the sellouts proposed by NZNO.

For this reason, NZPHOV was seen from the outset as a threat to the status quo. On March 20, Radio NZ reported that the group “was almost shut down twice in two weeks ... after a third party reported it to Facebook and the [administrators] were forced to prove they were real people.” One of the administrators said at the time, “whoever or whatever is going on, someone is very determined to have the movement shut down.”

As the WSWS has noted, however, the administrators of NZPHOV have themselves acted, at various points, to “shut down” criticism of the union’s collusion with District Health Boards and the government. This has included deleting hundreds of comments and blocking our articles.

This censorship, which we opposed, was temporarily relaxed after the cancellation of the July 5 strike, which provoked a wave of outrage among workers. At least three WSWS articles were shared to NZPHOV denouncing the anti-democratic move and calling for workers to break from the union bureaucracy and form independent rank-and-file committees. These articles attracted hundreds of likes, comments and shares. All have now been deleted.

The nurses’ movement is the sharpest expression of a developing movement within the New Zealand working class against the corporate elite and the political establishment. Primary school teachers have voted to strike, demanding a wage increase of 16 percent, and thousands of public servants, transport workers and fast food workers have also taken industrial action.

The urgent task is to unify the different struggles within New Zealand and internationally in a conscious movement against the entire pro-business framework of austerity. This can only be done if there is broad discussion among workers about the need to form new organisations: rank-and-file committees controlled by workers themselves and independent of the pro-capitalist trade unions.

Workers must also be allowed to discuss socialist demands: for a complete political break from the Labour Party, and for the billions of dollars wasted on the military and on tax breaks for the super-rich to be redirected to health and other essential services.

We encourage workers who agree with this perspective to register for our online meeting on Saturday July 14, at 4:00 p.m.



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