

Socialist Equality Group (New Zealand) holds online health workers' meeting

Our reporters
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The Socialist Equality Group (New Zealand), which is fighting to build a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), held an online forum last Saturday to discuss the ongoing health workers' dispute. The event followed the first nationwide strike in 30 years by nurses, midwives and healthcare assistants in public hospitals, on July 12.

The strike involved almost 30,000 workers, a majority of whom voted to reject a sellout pay deal recommended by the New Zealand Nurses Organisation (NZNO), which maintained low pay and dangerously low levels of staffing. NZNO is now negotiating behind closed doors with the District Health Boards (DHBs) and the Labour Party-led government, which has insisted the offer will not be increased.

The SEG forum was a critical discussion on the lessons of the dispute and the way forward. Participants included New Zealand and Australian health workers, members of the SEG and the Socialist Equality Party (Australia), as well as students and other workers.

Leading SEG member Tom Peters reviewed the widespread support for the strike, including from teachers, public servants and patients, and health workers throughout the world. "This is not only a New Zealand struggle," he emphasised. "Nurses and health workers here have to understand that they are part of a developing global movement against austerity that has been imposed on the working class of every country."

Peters responded to claims by Health Minister David Clark that the government cannot spend more on healthcare because it must set aside money in case of a national disaster. "As nurses have pointed out, the situation in public hospitals is a national disaster. However, it's a man-made disaster caused by the capitalist system," he said.

The speaker pointed to rotting buildings, overflowing emergency departments, thousands of patients being unable to access vital treatment, a surge in critical incidents in hospitals, and a shortage of mental health staff. These conditions, he explained, are part of a social crisis imposed

on the working class, which has led to a quarter of children living in poverty "while the 200 individuals on the *National Business Review's* Rich List control a total wealth of \$80 billion, 160 times the value of the nurses' pay offer."

While refusing to increase the offer to nurses, the government allocated \$2.3 billion to buy four new Air Force planes. Peters explained that this was aimed at integrating New Zealand into the build-up to war, driven by the US and its threats against Russia and China.

He declared that the Labour Party-NZ First-Greens coalition's promise of giving capitalism a "human face" had proven to be a fraud. The government was maintaining drastic levels of inequality and starving public health, education and other basic services. Primary school teachers have voted to strike for better pay, and thousands of public servants have also taken industrial action.

"Health workers are not just in an industrial dispute with District Health Boards," Peters stressed. "They are in a political struggle against the Labour government and its supporters, including the Green Party, NZ First and the trade unions," and against the capitalist system itself.

Critical lessons had to be drawn from the decades-long suppression of health workers by the NZNO, including its ongoing attempt to shut down the current struggle. Peters denounced the NZNO bureaucracy's censorship of critical voices. Nurse Danni Wilkinson, who administers the Facebook page "Nightingales Fight for fair pay" and has spoken against the union-backed deals, wrote that NZNO bureaucrats prevented her from speaking at an Auckland rally during the strike and convinced TV news programs to cancel scheduled interviews with her.

Peters said workers showed considerable courage and militancy in proceeding with the strike after the union declared there was nothing to be gained from it. But he warned that the struggle would be betrayed unless there is a political break from the union bureaucracy, the formation of independent, rank-and-file committees democratically controlled by workers themselves, and a conscious struggle against the Labour government, based on a socialist political

perspective.

Following these remarks, an Auckland nurse commented: “The whole idea of a union is to support its workers and this is not being done by the NZNO. It needs to stand up and support its members.”

She called for the government “to spend more money on healthcare, education and housing for the people. This is what people of New Zealand deserve, it’s basic needs for life: how can you put a price on it and underfund it so much? DHBs and the government say there is no money. Well, they need to look at their priorities with the budget.”

The nurse called for mandatory staffing ratios in hospitals to ensure “patients’ and our safety,” as well as higher pay. “We are losing too many experienced nurses and midwives to Australia. The government needs to act now.”

Michelle, an experienced mental health nurse and member of the SEP (Australia), said: “I want to express my solidarity with New Zealand nurses and emphasise that the conditions you face are not unique to New Zealand.”

Because of decades of underfunding, Australian workers face “stagnation of wages, intolerable and dangerous working conditions for staff and the lack of access to timely healthcare for patients ... We struggle financially to meet the growing cost of food, utilities and housing.” Time and again, she explained, Australian workers had entered into industrial action with widespread public support, only to be sold out by the union bureaucracy.

John, a clinician specialising in respiratory conditions at a public hospital in Australia, said that in his department “we haven’t had an increase in staffing since 1993” and staff were under intolerable pressures as a result. He called for a unified international struggle. “We need to reach across the Tasman, Australian and New Zealand workers alike, to advance the struggle for ourselves and our patients,” he said.

The Auckland nurse explained that many nurses were now demanding more strikes, but the NZNO was dragging out the negotiations. “Nurses have spoken, shown by the large numbers of strikes around the country. They need to continue to work together and strike together, and yes, maybe form a new union,” she said.

Cheryl Crisp, a leading member of the SEP (Australia), explained that in calling for the formation of rank-and-file committees, the SEG and the ICFI are not advocating the formation of another union. The unions, she said, “came into existence through the struggle of workers internationally as a means of extracting reforms and improvements for workers within the framework of capitalism.

“The unions have now been transformed into organisations that do not represent the interests of workers, but the interests of capitalism, because of the nature of these organisations.” The reactionary role of the trade unions in

every country is not simply due to bad leaders, but the fact that “capitalism cannot and will not provide any further reforms or gains for workers.” Instead, the ruling elite is seeking “to claw back what has already been won” in more than a century of struggle.

“The problem nurses face is the very system itself. It is not a mistake of bookkeeping that military spending has increased and health hasn’t.” Along with attacking living conditions at home, capitalist countries have embarked on preparations for war to control markets and resources at the expense of their rivals.

Independent committees, Crisp explained, are needed to unite the working class and fight for a socialist perspective and all the rights that were being stripped away from the working class by capitalist governments, including housing, the right to clean water, decent jobs and working conditions.

In concluding the discussion, Peters emphasised that the health workers’ struggle was far from over. Peters pointed out there is growing support for socialism internationally, the ICFI’s perspective is resonating, and the WSWs articles on the nurses’ dispute are finding a significant audience among workers who cannot afford to continue working under current conditions.

“We are in a period of intensifying class struggle internationally, but workers can’t succeed unless there is a break from the present leadership: from all the parties in parliament and the trade unions.” Health workers, teachers and others needed to consciously adopt a socialist perspective and coordinate their fight in New Zealand and internationally against austerity and against capitalism.



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