

After nationwide strike: The way forward for New Zealand health workers

The Socialist Equality Group (New Zealand)
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A fortnight has passed since around 30,000 New Zealand nurses, healthcare assistants and midwives in public hospitals held their first 24-hour nationwide strike in 30 years—the largest strike by any section of workers in decades.

The July 12 strike was carried out in defiance of the NZ Nurses' Organisation (NZNO) leaders, who cancelled an earlier strike scheduled for July 5—an anti-democratic move that provoked outrage among workers.

Hundreds of health workers in the nurses' Facebook group "New Zealand, please hear our voice" have demanded more strikes. However, as soon as the strike was over, the NZNO and government moved to close down the dispute. Bargaining was promptly re-started without any specific demands being advanced by the union and the government insisting that it would not increase its offer.

The fact that the talks have stalled with no further communication to nurses indicates that another sell-out is being prepared behind the scenes. Workers have now rejected four deals presented by the NZNO since late 2017 because none have met the needs of workers or the decrepit health system.

The struggle of health workers now stands at a crossroads: if it remains in the hands of the union bureaucracy, it will be betrayed. The NZNO has no intention of waging a sustained political and industrial campaign against the government. It is working with District Health Boards (DHBs) to wear down workers and pressure them to accept the government's lie that there is "no more money."

There are decisive political lessons to be drawn from this dispute. This is not simply an industrial conflict, but a political struggle against the Ardern Labour government, which rules, not on behalf of workers, but for the capitalist class. This government, in a coalition with NZ First and the Greens, has made clear that, despite campaign promises, there will be no gains for nurses or any other section of workers. The trade union bureaucracy is enforcing that austerity program.

The health workers' struggle has demolished claims that

the Labour-led government, installed in October 2017, would restore capitalism's "human face." Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern has been glorified internationally by the corporate media and the unions as a beacon of progress for women. The pseudo-left groups, the International Socialist Organisation and Socialist Aotearoa, supported Labour's election campaign based on false claims that it was a lesser evil to the National Party.

In fact, the Labour-led coalition is continuing National's attacks on living standards. It refuses to raise corporate taxes to address poverty and the underfunding of health, education and other basic services. Meanwhile, Labour has committed \$20 billion to military upgrades over the next decade and a half, to participate in US-led wars abroad, at the direct expense of health and other services.

The government is carrying out the demands of the corporate elite. On July 14 Kim Campbell, head of the Employers and Manufacturers Association, told TV3 many workers were "lucky to get one percent" annual pay rises and businesses feared that if nurses and teachers received much more, then "everybody else is going to have their hands out."

The ruling class's determination to keep wages down highlights the urgent need for workers to unite their different struggles. The main obstacle is the trade union bureaucracy, which has acted for decades on behalf of governments and big business to divide the working class and suppress resistance to redundancies, privatisations and wage cuts.

The Socialist Equality Group calls on workers to consciously adopt a socialist and internationalist perspective, in opposition to the entire political establishment, and to rebel against the pro-capitalist union bureaucracy by establishing independent rank-and-file workplace committees controlled democratically by workers themselves. These committees must broaden the fight against austerity by uniting all sections of the working class in New Zealand and internationally.

In Britain, thousands of people have joined protests against repeated cuts to the National Health Service, which has been

brought to the brink of collapse by underfunding and outsourcing to private companies. In Venezuela, the US, and in Australia, nurses are also engaged in struggles over low wages and staffing.

In New Zealand there has been a wave of industrial action. As well as nurses, thousands of rail and bus workers, fast food workers and public servants have struck, while primary school teachers recently voted to strike in pursuit of a 16 percent pay increase.

Unless the strangle-hold of the union bureaucracy is broken, these struggles will be isolated and betrayed.

NZNO leader Memo Musa admitted on July 10 that the union “compromised” with hospital management for the past decade by accepting low staffing, low wages and under-resourcing of hospitals. Before the recent strike, NZNO echoed the Labour government’s insistence that the current offer could not be increased. The union has ignored nurses’ demands, which gained widespread support on Facebook, for a pay rise of 18-20 percent and a mandatory ratio of one nurse to four patients.

Following the nationwide nurses’ strike in 1989, the unions quickly demobilised the movement against the then-Labour government and settled for a pay increase of about 2 percent. Over the next three decades strikes virtually disappeared while National and Labour governments oversaw the closure or privatisation of more than 100 hospitals, froze wages, increased patient fees and pushed thousands off surgery waiting lists.

The unions’ betrayals stem from the fundamental transformation of these organisations. The unions originally based themselves on gaining limited improvements for workers within the framework of capitalism and the nation-state system. The globalisation of production—the ability of corporations to operate on a global scale—fatally undermined this national-reformist perspective, and the unions transformed themselves into management agents of employers and the state.

Today, amid growing economic volatility, trade war and the lack of any real recovery from the 2008 financial crisis, the unions accept the government’s position that spending on public services must be strictly limited so taxes can be kept low for the super-rich, and billions of dollars made available to the military.

Health workers are already being driven to organise independently of the NZNO. Protests have been coordinated and demands discussed in the Facebook group “New Zealand, please hear our voice.” The group administrators, however, see their role as placing pressure on the union leadership, without challenging its authority. They have on several occasions deleted criticism of NZNO.

In opposition to the unions’ efforts to isolate every

industrial dispute, independent rank-and-file committees will strive to unite workers across different industries and communities in a common fight against soaring inequality, homelessness, poverty and militarism. They must also forge ties with workers in Australia and other countries, who are seeking to fight back against their appalling conditions.

Poverty is placing unbearable pressure on the health system, with growing reports of “third world” diseases such as rheumatic fever and bronchiectasis, caused by damp and overcrowded housing. Rank-and-file committees must connect the fight for well-staffed hospitals and highly paid health workers with demands for affordable, high-quality housing, and decent wages and benefits for all.

The formation of independent workplace committees must be accompanied by the building of a new political party, based on socialism and internationalism, in opposition to every party in parliament.

Workers cannot accept the Labour government’s lie that there is “no money” for these basic rights. There is plenty of money in the hands of the super-rich. A well-funded health system, accessible to all who need it, is incompatible with capitalism, in which everything is subordinate to the profit interests of the wealthy elite. Society must be completely reorganised on the basis of human need, not private profit.

We call on those who agree with this perspective to study our program, read the WSWS and above all, join the Socialist Equality Group, which is fighting in New Zealand to build a section of the Trotskyist movement, the International Committee of the Fourth International.



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