

# New Zealand Nurses Organisation presents fifth sell-out pay offer

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Two weeks after the July 12 national nurses' strike, the New Zealand Nurses Organisation (NZNO) has struck another deal with the country's District Health Boards (DHBs) and is recommending members accept it.

A majority of the NZNO's 29,000 members in public hospitals have already rejected four sell-outs presented by the union since bargaining started last year. The nationwide strike, the first since 1989, was carried out in defiance of NZNO leaders, who cancelled an earlier strike scheduled for July 5, provoking outrage among workers.

Bargaining was re-started following the strike without any specific demands being advanced by the union and with the Labour Party-led government still insisting there was "no more money" to increase the DHBs' offer.

Announcing the new deal on Wednesday, NZNO official Glenda Alexander said the union was recommending it because it retained "previously achieved benefits" while including two "significant improvements" above the fourth offer.

In fact, the proposed agreement is virtually identical to those already decisively rejected: a pay increase of 3 percent per annum for 2017–2019 and a grossly inadequate 2 percent increase in hospital staffing.

According to Alexander, the new offer "expanded on the consistency members had asked for" on all steps across the pay scale. The new step 7 on the registered nurse and registered midwife scale will now take effect 12 months after the implementation of step 6. This does nothing more than bring forward access to the top salary step so that it falls within the term of the agreement. Progression from step 6 to 7 does not become available until May 2020.

Alexander promised "pay equity" by December 2019.

The NZNO was "confident" this "will deliver further pay increases as of that date." This is an empty promise, devoid of any guarantees. So-called pay equity with comparable, predominantly male occupations has been foreshadowed since the 1980s, without anything being delivered.

According to Alexander, the NZNO secured "clearer monitoring and reporting mechanisms" in relation to additional staff funding and the provision of "safe staffing" through the Care Capacity Demand Management (CCDM) system.

This does nothing to resolve the crisis of chronic understaffing in hospitals. Many nurses have called for a guaranteed ratio of one nurse to four patients. Instead, a meagre \$38 million is set aside for 500 extra staff across 21 DHBs nationwide—not enough to address attrition rates and keep pace with population growth, let alone address issues of workload and safe patient care. The CCDM does not include a mandated ratio of staff to patients.

As with the last deal, the union will seek to ram through the agreement with anti-democratic methods. No mass meetings have been called to give nurses the opportunity to debate the offer. Nurses will be reliant almost exclusively on the NZNO website for information about the settlement. Online voting will take place from July 31 to August 6.

While the July 12 strike received widespread support from the working class, the nurses are under immense pressure from the media, government and business leaders to accept the "revised offer."

The *New Zealand Herald* headlined its report on July 25: "New Zealand nurses expected to give thumbs-up to new pay offer from the nation's DHBs." This is a baseless lie. The *Herald* speaks for the corporate elite, which is desperate to have the dispute shut down.

Kim Campbell, head of the Employers and Manufacturers Association, told TV3 on July 14 that many workers were “lucky to get 1 percent” annual pay rises. If nurses and teachers received much more, “everybody else is going to have their hands out.”

There is strong opposition among health workers, who did not strike in order to be presented with basically the same sell-out deal two weeks later. A poll in the Facebook group “New Zealand, please hear our voice,” run by several nurses, found that over 1,598 respondents would reject the new offer, 230 would accept and 92 were undecided. Another Facebook poll so far shows that 455 people would leave NZNO if they had an alternative. Only 37 would remain in the union.

Speaking to the WSWs, Michelle, a nurse from Auckland said the NZNO had been dragging out the dispute to “wear us down” and force through a vote to accept.

A Dunedin-based nurse described the union as being in “crisis,” with the hierarchy failing to “listen” to the members. The NZNO boasted about being a “membership-led organisation,” the nurse declared, “but they won’t let us lead!”

Another nurse wrote to the Socialist Equality Group (New Zealand) praising its recent statement on the dispute. She said many workers were “expressing extreme disappointment and annoyance” at NZNO’s “pathetic and lacklustre performance throughout these negotiations,” including “the aura of secrecy and lack of consultation with their members.”

In “New Zealand, please hear our voice,” Karen pointedly asked: “Did it really take that long to say so little?” Sam declared: “What’s most shitty about this is ... we waited a week for THIS???. Someone admit these fools into a ward and let them experience what these complaints are about.” Mary asked: “Do they think we are idiots. Trying to wear us down?” Rebecca demanded “a poll for a new union.”

There are a number of calls for fresh strike action. Melissa wrote: “Trying to decide whether to roll over and accept or stick it to the man!!! Much more of the second option kind of girl.” Another worker wrote: “how about a poll where staff stick together and do a mass strike without the union...?” Calls have been made for a 48-hour strike or rolling stoppages and the NZNO has been criticised for failing to ballot members over further action before re-entering negotiations.

*World Socialist Web Site* and Socialist Equality Group have consistently warned that if the nurses’ struggle 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 Ardern Labour-led government, which rules for the wealthy elite.

The Socialist Equality Group calls on health workers to reject the new sell-out. They should demand the immediate convening of mass stopwork meetings to allow for the widest democratic discussion. There must be no censorship of opposition viewpoints. The online ballot must be replaced with a properly supervised vote held at meetings of workers.

Workers need to consciously adopt a socialist and internationalist perspective, in opposition to the entire political establishment, and to rebel against the pro-capitalist unions by establishing independent rank-and-file workplace committees controlled democratically by workers themselves.

This is not simply an industrial conflict, but a political struggle that raises vital issues for the entire working class. 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.



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