New Zealand Defence Force nurses deployed during strike

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New Zealand Defence Minister Ron Mark recently revealed that 17 Defence Force (NZDF) nurses were deployed to work in hospitals around the country during the nationwide nurses' strike on July 12.

Mark, a member of the right-wing populist NZ First Party, a coalition partner in the Labour Party-led government, and a former soldier who served in the Middle East, confirmed on July 24 that Labour Health Minister David Clark sought to use military nurses in the event of the industrial action.

Mark approved the deployment of up to 20 nurses under section 9 of the Defence Act 1990, two days before the strike. The detachment of regular force nurses was provided "to perform general nursing duties, if required, in accordance with priorities as provided by the Ministry of Health," Mark said.

News of the deployment was kept from the public, and the majority of health workers, throughout the strike and for the following 12 days prior to Mark's brief parliamentary statement.

This is the fourth time in 70 years that the Defence Act or its predecessor has been invoked during an industrial dispute. The first was during the bitter and prolonged 1951 waterfront workers' strike which resulted in a decisive defeat for the workers. The other two were in the prisons during industrial action by corrections officers in 1993 and in 2001.

The move by the Labour-NZ First-Green Party government to use military personnel sends a sharp warning to the entire working class as to what the ruling elite has in store as the growing movement over wages, living standards and working conditions gathers pace. It sets a serious precedent for the use of the armed forces in any circumstances the government deems an "emergency" in the future.

The significance of the deployment is not lessened by the "modest" numbers involved. A new Strategic Defence Policy Statement, released on July 6, enshrines the role of the military in protecting "national security" with a key role to prevent "activities aimed at undermining or overturning Government institutions, principles and values that underpin New Zealand society." In plain language, military forces are being prepared to suppress extra-parliamentary opposition to soaring social inequality, austerity and militarisation.

During the July 12 strike, the NZDF nurses provided support for the provision of "life-preserving services (LPS)" agreed between District Health Boards (DHBs) and the New Zealand Nurses Organisation (NZNO). They worked in emergency departments and intensive care in "priority locations," with one in Taupo, two each in Palmerston North and Invercargill and six each in Canterbury and Waikato.

Clark said as this was the first nationwide strike by nurses in a generation, it was "prudent to do all that we could to ensure our hospitals had enough nurses in place for the duration of the strike." The minister paid "tribute" to the "constructive way the New Zealand Nurses Organisation and district health boards worked together" to make sure life-preserving services (LPS) were in place during the strike.

The opposition National Party—which spent the last decade in government drastically underfunding health, education and other essential services—hypocritically said the NZDF deployment highlighted "the government's failings." Health spokesman Michael Woodhouse said Labour had "lost control of the health sector."

Under health sector legislation, if a DHB is unable to find sufficient non-union staff to provide adequate cover during a strike, it must negotiate with the union for dispensation for members to do so. Additionally, so-

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called “good faith” provisions in the Employment Relations Act (ERA) bind unions and the DHBs to reach agreement on the extent of provisions necessary for patients’ safety, staff numbers and protocols for dealing with emergencies. Failure to do so could result in the courts ruling the strike illegal.

The ERA was instituted by the former Helen Clark-led Labour government with the support of the unions in 2000. It set up a sophisticated legal mechanism to contain and suppress the struggles of the working class behind a façade of class collaboration and inclusiveness. These laws are used by the unions to collude with employers and enforce the settlement of industrial disputes.

During the strike, the NZNO provided its services to organise nurses by arranging volunteers or designating staff to fill placements. Union members who found themselves rostered on but didn’t want to work had to apply to be removed from the roster.

In the lead-up to the proposed national strike on July 5, which was cancelled by the NZNO, and the subsequent one on July 12, many nurses used social media to express opposition to the way the union was collaborating with the process. One notice sent out by the NZNO bluntly told nurses they had a “collective responsibility” to “step up” and provide LPS. Any nurses who had agreed to work a roster but chose to withdraw was warned they would “put patients at risk.”

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 posted on Facebook: “The ‘good faith’ rule needs to go as it is very one sided.”

The NZDF nurses were brought in to provide cover because, under conditions of mass hostility to both the DHBs and the NZNO, many nurses were not prepared to be pressured into “volunteering” not to strike.

It is inconceivable that the NZNO would not have known of the NZDF deployment, and may well have assisted with its organisation. The critical role played by the union in the LPS operation involves close collaboration with each DHB providing cover for the strike. The NZNO has not, at the time of writing, responded to questions from the WSWS concerning its knowledge of, and involvement with, the NZDF nurses.

The NZNO is now moving to shut down the dispute. It has recommended workers accept a fifth sellout offer, described by union CEO Memo Musa as “an astonishingly good offer.” In fact, it is almost identical to the last two sellouts which were rejected prior to the strike.

The mobilisation of the military against workers reveals the essential class character of the government and the political forces that support it. The NZNO and other unions are deeply implicated in collaborating with the entire official political set-up and operations of the state.

The Labour-led government, far from restoring capitalism’s “human face,” as it falsely promised following the election, stands exposed as an enemy of the working class. The health workers’ struggle has demolished the glorification of the Ardern government by the media, the unions and the pseudo-lefts, as a beacon of progress.

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