

New Zealand nurses express frustration, anger in union broadcast

Our reporters
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Nearly 30,000 New Zealand nurses, midwives and healthcare assistants began voting on July 31 on whether to accept or reject a deal with the 21 District Health Boards (DHBs) recommended by the New Zealand Nurses Organisation (NZNO). The online ballot runs until August 6.

The Multi-Employer Collective Agreement (MECA) offer, the fifth presented by the union since negotiations began last year, is virtually identical to one that a majority of workers rejected before a nationwide strike on July 12. It includes a 9 percent pay rise spread over 2017 to 2019 and a miniscule 2 percent increase in staffing.

New Zealand nurses, teachers and other workers are joining the global resurgence by the working class in response to more than a decade of austerity supported by the entire political establishment, and enforced by the trade unions. Wages have been frozen and hospitals are grossly understaffed, with thousands of people missing out on vital treatment as a result.

The NZNO is trying to ram through the agreement with anti-democratic methods. No mass meetings have been called to allow members to debate the offer.

Moving to undercut widespread hostility to the deal, the NZNO signed a so-called “Safe Staffing Accord” with the Labour government’s Health Minister David Clark on Monday, the day before voting on the MECA began. The “accord” is a fraud which promises further discussion between the union and health officials, with nothing concrete to address the chronic understaffing in the public hospitals. The MECA commits a paltry \$NZ35 million increase in funding for staff, enough for just 500 nurses nationally.

On Monday evening, NZNO industrial officer Cee Payne held a Q&A session, broadcast on the union’s Facebook page. As with a similar online event held

before the strike, it was a desperate attempt to sell the deal and shut down the increasingly militant rebellion among nurses.

The 30-minute broadcast only served to underline the vast gulf that exists between the privileged union bureaucracy and thousands of discontented health workers. As the presentation unfolded, hundreds of comments and questions were posted online, most expressing anger and frustration at the NZNO’s failure to address the fundamental issues concerning nurses.

Ed Ledz declared, “This is basically the same offer compared to the last offer and the one before that.” Noting that there was no more money from the government, he asked, “Why do you keep recommending this anyway?” Cris Lagria commented, “[W]hy did we go on strike just to swallow the same thing we rejected?”

Payne answered that there had been “very limited [government] funding at the start of the process.” There was, she claimed, an “affordability question,” with many claims unobtainable with “what employers have got to offer across the table.”

This response exposes the complete capitulation of the NZNO to the demands of the Labour-led government and the ruling elite. In fact, as many nurses have pointed out, there is plenty of money to boost military spending, beginning with a \$NZ2.3 billion purchase of new anti-submarine aircraft.

Payne advanced three reasons the union is recommending the new offer. Firstly, access to a new Step 7 on the pay scale will be brought forward by a few months, but will not begin until May 2020. Nurses and midwives will become eligible for the increase, about \$2,100, after 12 months on Step 6, subject to “satisfactory performance.” Payne blandly assured the audience that the union saw “no problems” with the

performance requirement, which will be decided by DHB managements.

In reply, Simon Auty said he had been nursing for more than 20 years and asked, “[W]hy should we have to do another year to get to step 7?” Other questions included several about why nurses’ salaries remained well below teachers’—who are calling for a 16 percent increase this year—and why there is no provision for back pay.

Payne highlighted the government’s promise to introduce “pay equity” with equivalent male-dominated professions by December 2019. The amount workers will receive from this, however, will be subject to separate negotiations. Labour Party governments have pledged pay equity for nurses since the 1980s but it has never been implemented.

In response, Charlie Borren asked, “[I]f implemented Dec 2019, does that mean we will see 100% pay equity implemented? Can you guarantee this? & how will you be enforcing this & holding the DHBs accountable?” Paula noted there was “nothing guaranteed” in the union’s promises while Gabrielle expressed suspicion that any implementation would be spread “over a number of years.”

Respondents strongly protested that “safe staffing” has not been addressed in the deal, despite the union’s accord with the government to implement the existing Care Capacity Demand Management (CCDM) system by 2021. Susan Law warned the accord is “just words on paper” and most likely “another whitewash.”

Lisa Tito asked, “Wouldn’t that money be better spent on the front line where it is needed now and not in middle management analysing the shortages?” Joel wanted to know why there had been “no push for the implementation of legislated ratios.”

One exasperated respondent posted that Payne and her moderator sounded like they were “reading from a script” instead of replying to questions. Others noted that the presenters only addressed the questions that they wished to, with another asking “Why aren’t you listening to your members?” Sue declared, “I can’t believe that she is so smugly happy with a sh*t deal.”

Most commenters were not at all convinced by the Q&A. Dhu bluntly demanded, “[I]f the vote is ‘no’, when is there another strike?” Rose also wanted to know “[W]hat is NZNO strategy if vote is ‘no’?” Noelle Kells asked: “If the vote is ‘no’, where do we

go from here? Clearly, the current strategy is not working.” Yet another commented; “Hey Cee, how to start a new union?”

These questions and others that the officials could no longer avoid were brushed over as briefly as possible. Without answering directly, Payne declared she would view a situation arising from a ‘no’ vote, including the “spectre of industrial action,” with “trepidation.” She emphasised that from August 1, workers covered by the MECA would move onto individual contracts until the dispute is settled.

As the Q&A made clear, the NZNO cannot and will not carry forward a struggle to address the wages and conditions of nurses or the crisis in the hospitals. This is because what is required is a political struggle against the Labour-led government and the ruling elite that it serves. Workers must oppose the entire framework accepted by the union—the lie that there is “no money.” 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.



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