

New Zealand Nurses Organisation rams through sellout pay deal

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The New Zealand Nurses Organisation (NZNO) announced at a media conference on Tuesday that it had secured enough votes in an online ballot held over the previous week to seal a contract settlement with the country's 21 District Health Boards (DHBs).

The deal for a new Multi-Employer Contract Agreement (MECA) is a betrayal of the union's 30,000 members, who rejected four previous offers presented over the past nine months. Health workers held a 24-hour strike on July 12, the first nationwide action in nearly 30 years, to demand better pay—after 14 years with no substantial increase—and improved staffing in public hospitals. The endorsement of the agreement has only been achieved by the deliberate wearing down of health workers by the NZNO.

NZNO organiser Cee Payne declared that the new agreement “will lay down the foundations for a much safer and rewarding career in nursing,” adding “our members' voices have been heard.” Union president Grant Brookes said workers had taken industrial action “to secure decent pay, safe staffing, and safe patient care.”

In reality, the final settlement is almost identical to two previous offers that workers rejected prior to the strike. It includes a 9 percent pay rise spread over 2017 to 2019, just above inflation, and a miniscule 500 extra staff for the entire country. Hospitals are woefully understaffed due to a decade of austerity measures following the 2008 financial crisis. As a result, patients are placed at risk and tens of thousands of people are denied vital treatment every year.

The strike, the first since 1989, was carried out in defiance of NZNO leaders, who cancelled an earlier stoppage on July 5, provoking outrage among workers. Following the strike, the union again echoed the Labour Party-led government's claim that there was “no more

money” to increase the DHBs' offer.

Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern feigned sympathy for nurses, telling the media she understood there were “some who think we haven't gone far enough.” She declared that the new deal was “the start of a long-term program to rebuild our public health system and the status of the nursing profession.”

The NZNO trumpeted the government's promise of “pay equity” with similar male-dominated professions by December 2019. This will, however, be subject to separate negotiations. Labour Party governments have pledged pay equity for nurses since the 1980s but it has never been implemented.

The union did not reveal how many nurses, midwives and healthcare assistants voted in favour of the deal. It declared in a press statement that voter turnout was “exceptionally high” and that the MECA was accepted by “a significant majority of members.”

The union obtained its majority through a deliberately drawn-out process of attrition. Mass opposition among health workers was worn down over several months. The NZNO rammed through the final agreement with anti-democratic methods. No mass meetings were called to allow members to debate the offer.

Significantly, NZNO official Kerri Nuku used Tuesday's press conference to “thank the media... for supporting us.” Newspapers, including the *New Zealand Herald*, and right-wing commentators like Mike Hosking had pressured health workers to accept the sellout. TV stations collaborated with the NZNO following the strike by cancelling interviews scheduled with Danni Wilkinson, a nurse who had publicly criticised the union-backed offer.

One nurse, who asked not to be named, told the WSWs that “all the members felt it was the same offer” as those they had already rejected. She said

health workers “gave up” after “the government, the DHBs, and to a lesser extent the union turned their backs on us. We felt betrayed.”

The nurse described working in unsafe hospitals as “like going from one potential disaster to another. Nurses are constantly made to feel they are not doing a good job. Everyone is too busy to do a decent job. We are micro-managed, constantly forced to prove you are doing the job properly.” The health system, she said, was “only held together because of the goodwill of nurses. Many work excessive overtime, just to help their team get through.”

Another nurse, from Auckland, said hospital workers felt that the strike “didn’t make any difference at all. They said they were listening to us. We don’t mean anything to them. I know so many people who have written to NZNO to say: we’re not happy with this.” She criticised the union for failing to make any demands in negotiations with DHBs. She believed members had voted for the offer because after a year, “a lot of people are over it” and felt nothing more could be gained.

In response to the claims that there was no more money for decent healthcare, the nurse noted that “they’ve got enough money for war,” for “regional development” projects, which are typically handouts to businesses, and the expansion of foreign diplomacy.

“Five hundred new nurses ain’t going to mean anything for 20 DHBs,” she added. “People are waiting five or six hours to be seen by a doctor in emergency departments. Why? We have a right to healthcare.”

Hundreds of nurses took to social media to express their anger.

On the NZNO’s Facebook page, Jane wrote: “This is not a win, this is being worn down and lacking any faith in you to do better for us.” Gail said: “I am no longer an NZNO member... most disappointed.”

Denise was one of several who demanded the release of voting figures. “I want to see the voting numbers for and against, which as members we should be allowed to view,” she commented.

A Facebook post by Unions Wellington hailing the NZNO’s deal as a “win” attracted dozens of angry comments.

Simon replied: “It’s a sad day when the union movement sells out its members in favour of the government. You cannot frame this as a win, this is

being sold [down] the river by those who are supposed to be working for you.”

Kirsten wrote: “NZNO FAILED!! If they had ever been winners, in any way shape or form, the nursing profession would never have been in the disarray that it is, and it will continue to be. This is not a good deal, not a win, and to celebrate it as such is embarrassing.”

Discussion has been limited, however, because immediately after the announcement of the MECA, administrators of the popular nurses’ Facebook group, “New Zealand, please hear our voice,” suspended the group for 24 hours “to let the outcome sink in and allow time for contemplation.” The administrators sought to maintain “unity” with the NZNO throughout the dispute, but the group nonetheless became a forum for growing oppositional sentiment.

The NZNO is an organisation of upper middle class bureaucrats who serve the interests of the government and big business.

Its sellout underscores the urgency of the Socialist Equality Group’s call for health staff to build rank-and-file committees, democratically controlled by workers themselves and independent of the unions and the entire political establishment.

These committees must base themselves on a socialist program to unite hospital workers, teachers and others, in New Zealand and internationally, in a joint struggle against austerity and militarism. Society must be completely restructured, with billions of dollars redistributed from the super-rich and corporations to meet the social needs of the working class for decent, well-funded public healthcare, education and housing.



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