

Lessons of the New Zealand Nurses Organisation's sellout: Build rank-and-file committees! Unite the working class against the Labour government!

The Socialist Equality Group (New Zealand)
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After nearly a year of negotiations, protests and one 24-hour strike last month, the New Zealand Nurses Organisation (NZNO) on August 7 ratified a sellout deal covering almost 30,000 nurses, healthcare assistants and midwives in public hospitals.

None of the pressing issues facing health workers has been resolved. The 9 percent pay rise across three years is just above official inflation and does not make up for more than a decade of stagnant wages. The commitment to hire 500 additional staff for the entire country, if indeed it is fulfilled, will not address the crisis of under-staffing in hospitals.

Health workers showed great determination to fight for decent wages and safe conditions for staff and patients. They rejected four separate offers, staged mass protests and held their first nationwide strike since 1989.

However, according to NZNO, union members voted 64.1 percent in favour of a fifth union-backed offer, which was virtually the same as two offers they previously rejected.

How did this happen? Workers must make a sober assessment of this experience and draw critical lessons from it. The NZNO worked deliberately to drag out the dispute, to isolate and wear down health workers in order to convince them there was no alternative to accepting the austerity contract demanded by the Labour Party-NZ First-Greens coalition government.

Following last year's election Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern declared that soaring homelessness and poverty showed capitalism had "failed" and needed reforming. Deputy Prime Minister Winston Peters pledged to restore capitalism's "human face."

These promises, promoted by the unions and pseudo-left groups, were a fraud. Labour has continued the previous National Party government's underfunding of health, education, welfare and other essential services. Taxes have been kept low for the rich and billions of dollars spent on the police, prisons, and war preparations.

Just before the July 12 strike, the government announced \$2.3 billion for new Air Force planes—about four times the cost of the health workers' settlement. At the same time, government ministers insisted there was "no more money" for health. Similarly, following a nationwide strike by 29,000 teachers on August 15, Education Minister Chris Hipkins told Radio NZ he would not grant their claim for a 16 percent pay increase over two years because "we need to live within our means."

Business leaders have warned that if teachers and nurses make significant wage gains, this will trigger similar demands by low-paid workers in every industry. The ruling elite is relying on the unions to prevent such a movement from developing.

NZNO leaders echoed the government's lie that there was "no more money." They presented health workers with one sellout offer after another, ignoring widespread demands for an 18–20 percent pay increase and staffing ratios of one nurse to four patients.

The struggle of the nurses required a political fight against the Labour government of Ardern and Peters, which rules on behalf of the capitalist ruling class, and against the trade unions that defend it.

To overcome rank-and-file opposition, the union resorted to anti-democratic methods. It refused to hold mass meetings to allow debate and discussion; cancelled one of two strikes endorsed by union members; and tried to censor at least one nurse who spoke out against the deal in the media.

The strikes in New Zealand are part of a global resurgence of class struggle that poses the need for workers to organise and coordinate their actions internationally. In every country, however, the trade unions are working hand-in-hand with governments and corporations to isolate and betray these struggles.

Recent strikes by teachers in the United States, largely organised on Facebook, were shut down by the education unions. Hospital workers in Britain are outraged after the Royal College of Nursing pushed through a miserly 6.5 percent pay increase over three years by lying to its members about the deal.

Unions emerged during the 19th century as a specific form of workers' organisation aimed at gaining limited improvements within capitalism and the nation state system. For relatively brief periods of economic boom, including after World War II, some workers were able to improve their conditions through trade union struggles.

By the 1980s, however, the unions' perspective of national reforms had been fatally undermined by the globalisation of production. Transnational corporations could now exploit labour in many different countries to get the maximum profit. This dramatic change in the structure of global capitalism strengthened the objective unity of the working class across borders. The unions, however, rooted in the national economy, were hostile to the socialist perspective of uniting workers internationally.

The privileged union bureaucracies and social democratic parties

responded to the unprecedented global mobility of capital by becoming open “partners” of their “own” ruling class. They pressured workers to “sacrifice” jobs, wages and conditions in the name of strengthening the national economy against foreign competitors.

New Zealand provides a striking example of this global transformation. The 1984–90 Labour Party government of David Lange launched a ruthless pro-market assault on the working class, similar to the policies of Margaret Thatcher in Britain and Ronald Reagan in the US. Labour removed subsidies and national protections for industry, cut taxes for the rich, slashed jobs and privatised public services, leading to a rapid increase in unemployment and social inequality.

All of this was done with the collaboration of the unions, which suppressed workers’ resistance and facilitated mass redundancies, including in forestry, manufacturing, meat processing and railways. Following the 1980s, hundreds of thousands of workers left the unions in disgust. Union coverage fell from nearly half of the workforce in 1985 to just 17 percent today.

The health sector was not spared. Labour closed dozens of hospitals and began privatising aged care. Nurses and other hospital workers carried out a nationwide one-day strike in February 1989 in response to a wage freeze and unsafe levels of staff. The New Zealand Nurses Association, NZNO’s predecessor, quickly shut down the movement, cancelling a second scheduled strike. Union leaders promised to work with hospital management to find “savings” and accepted a pay rise of just 2 percent.

The NZNO’s betrayals paved the way for more attacks by National and Labour Party governments, including increased prescription fees, the expansion of private hospitals and the failure of funding to keep pace with population growth and inflation.

Conditions have now reached a crisis point. There are frequent reports of people forced to wait hours in overflowing emergency departments; elderly people living in chronic pain unable to access surgery; and cancer patients whose life expectancies have been shortened because of the lack of prompt treatment. Nurses have reported increased assaults from patients and other avoidable incidents caused by unsafe levels of staffing. After NZNO’s betrayal the situation will deteriorate further.

In response to the sell out by the NZNO, there have been calls to democratise the union and change it from within. These calls are not new and do not address the fundamental question facing nurses and that is what perspective must be adopted to not only defeat the betrayals of the union leadership but to advance the interests of nurses and the working class as a whole. To take this forward, workers have to know who are their friends and who are not.

Pseudo-left organisations such as International Socialist Organisation stated on August 8 that nurses “were let down by the defeatist misleadership of the NZNO” but depicted the meagre staffing increase and pay rise as a “real step forward.” On August 15, it described NZNO’s failure to take “militant action” as merely a “mistake.”

Socialist Aotearoa, which has close ties to the Unite union, has criticised the NZNO bureaucracy and called on the rank and file to “demand a new democratic governance structure where members have a direct say in how decisions of the union are made.”

Such calls to “democratise” the unions are made in order to keep workers trapped in organisations that are hostile to their interests and subordinate them politically to the Labour Party. This is borne out by the very experiences in the NZNO itself.

Current NZNO president Grant Brookes was elected in 2015 following a campaign to “democratise” the union. Brookes is a self-described “eco-socialist,” a former member of the pseudo-left group Fightback and the Maori nationalist Mana Party. In October 2015 he told *Nursing Review* he wanted to ensure nurses were not “marginalised and ignored” and that “our organisation is guided by the membership.”

Brookes’ election changed nothing: three years on, he is an integral part of the NZNO bureaucracy. On July 12 he told striking workers: “I believe the government and the DHBs also want a better health system for us all.” He said there was “some truth” to the Labour Party’s lie that it could not afford to fix the crisis in the health system.

For nurses, teachers and all workers, it is not courage or determination to fight which is missing, but an alternative socialist perspective to that of the nationalist program of the union leadership.

The Socialist Equality Group calls for workers to break decisively from the pro-capitalist unions and build rank-and-file committees, controlled by workers themselves and politically independent of the Labour Party. These committees must demand:

- * an across-the-board pay increase of 20 percent for nurses, healthcare assistants, midwives and all hospital staff.
- * dozens of new, fully staffed hospital buildings to eliminate overcrowding and ensure prompt treatment of patients.
- * abolition of all patient fees for medical and dental care.
- * thousands more nurses to implement mandatory nurse-to-patient ratios of one to four.
- * workers’ control over the allocation of funds within District Health Boards.

Health workers’ rank-and-file committees should link up with teachers and other sections of the working class, in New Zealand, Australia and internationally, to wage a unified campaign against austerity and militarism.

Above all, this struggle requires the building of a new party, based on a socialist and internationalist political program and the fight for a workers’ government. A genuinely universal public health system is incompatible with capitalism, in which everything is subordinated to the accumulation of profits by the business elite, at the expense of the workers who produce all society’s wealth. The fortunes being hoarded by the banks and the super-rich, and wasted on the military, must be redirected to address the social crisis.

This is the perspective of the Socialist Equality Group, which is fighting to build the New Zealand section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, the world Trotskyist movement. We call on those who agree with this statement to join us.



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