

# New Zealand Nurses Organisation lashes out at critics on social media

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On August 22, the New Zealand Nurses Organisation's (NZNO) Board posted a statement on its Facebook page lashing out at members who criticised the union bureaucracy on social media.

The post began by praising the “dedication and passion” of the union negotiators who recently pushed through a sellout pay deal for nearly 30,000 nurses, midwives and healthcare assistants in public hospitals. It includes a paltry wage increase of 9 percent over three years for most workers, not enough to meet the soaring cost of living, and a promise of 500 extra staff spread across the entire country, which will do nothing to address the severe under-staffing in hospital wards.

The NZNO Board stated that it “acknowledges the part social media played in the process, which at times directed negative and personal attacks towards NZNO members and staff.” Without pointing to any examples of such “personal attacks,” the statement warned that “individual nurses” who used social media faced serious “risks.”

Hundreds of nurses have used Facebook to express anger and frustration over the NZNO's collusion with the Labour Party-led government and District Health Boards (DHBs) during the nine-month pay dispute. Four sellout offers were presented by the union and voted down by workers. No mass meetings were held to debate the offers and union leaders cancelled one of two strikes that members had voted for.

NZNO leaders also echoed the government's lie that there was “no more money” to address the crisis in the healthcare system, even as billions of dollars were set aside to strengthen the military.

The final agreement, secured by wearing down and demoralising health workers, is virtually identical to two offers previously rejected.

Despite the passage of the deal, the NZNO Board's

statement underscores that it remains fearful about widespread opposition among rank-and-file health workers. Acting on behalf of the DHBs and the government, the union is desperately attempting to silence dissent by means of threats. It states that “the Board takes very seriously the safety and wellbeing of its members and staff, and will do all in its power as invested by the [NZNO] Constitution to maintain that and the organisation's professional reputation.”

Not a shred of evidence is provided to back up the inflammatory implication that staff members' “safety and wellbeing” was endangered by comments on social media.

According to the NZNO Constitution, it is an “offence” not only to “threaten or assault” a union member or official, but also to “bring NZNO into disrepute or defame NZNO, its staff or officers.” If the NZNO Board finds that an offence has been committed it can impose penalties, including a fine of up to \$1,000, a severe reprimand, or expulsion from the union.

In other words, if the NZNO Board decides that a member's Facebook comment has brought the union “into disrepute,” it can fine and expel the worker, potentially seriously damaging his or her career.

Many workers commented denouncing the Board's statement. David wrote: “Smacks of threatening behaviour to any that would dare to make criticism of a process that has been quite rightly condemned by members. How many refused offers?”

Helen said the statement was “disappointing and shows how out of touch our union is from its members.”

Steve wrote sarcastically: “Yes we promise to remain submissive and obedient to your almighty glory, greater wisdom and power.”

Julie commented: "[I]t is disgusting to pat themselves on the back when so many are so unhappy with the results and to be so ready to stifle criticism by alluding to codes of conduct ... It is disgustingly heavy handed and authoritarian. I am not intimidated and intend to speak up about the nursing profession and the tatters it is in."

The NZNO faced considerable difficulty imposing its sellout, largely because health workers organised protests and debated the union-backed offers on social media. The Facebook group "New Zealand, please hear our voice" (NZPHOV) attracted more than 46,000 members and became a forum for discussion.

The group administrators, however, have at various times deleted criticism of NZNO, including posts of *World Socialist Web Site* articles, and sought to promote the union. On August 18, the administrators declared they would no longer allow any discussion of the NZNO pay agreement because "that ship has sailed and it's time to move on." They also would no longer accept posts comparing the nurses' dispute with the emerging struggle by teachers, who went on strike on August 15.

The NZPHOV administrators claimed these steps would prevent discussions from "being divisive." In reality, the anti-democratic moves will assist the unions in preventing a united industrial and political struggle of health, education and other workers.

Internationally, the trade unions police the working class on behalf of big business and the state, which are terrified by the re-emergence of class struggle as workers seek to fight back against austerity measures imposed since the 2008 financial crisis.

The ruling elites are particularly alarmed by workers using the internet to share information and coordinate their actions independently of the unions. This year, teachers in the US have organised strikes and protests using Facebook. Hundreds of thousands of truckers in Brazil coordinated a strike using WhatsApp.

In 2015, the United Auto Workers (UAW) in the US denounced the role of social media in the rank-and-file rebellion by auto workers against the union's deals with Ford, Fiat Chrysler and General Motors. Information circulated by workers, including WSWs articles analysing the pro-company sellouts, was attacked by the union as "fake news." It has since been revealed that UAW officials accepted millions of

dollars in bribes from Fiat Chrysler to push through attacks on auto workers.

The campaign against "fake news" has since been taken up and vastly expanded by Facebook and Google, working closely with the US and its allies, to censor left-wing, anti-war and socialist websites.

The NZNO's bullying, anti-democratic manoeuvres and collusion with the government are not due to bad individual leaders, but the very nature of the trade unions. These organisations do not represent the working class but speak for a comfortable upper-middle class layer seeking to preserve its privileged position within capitalism.

The Socialist Equality Group (New Zealand) is holding an online forum to discuss the lessons of the NZNO's sellout, including the case for new organisations: rank-and-file committees controlled by workers themselves. The formation of such committees must be linked with a socialist strategy to unite workers in New Zealand and internationally against the capitalist system.

We urge workers to join this vitally important discussion on Saturday, September 1 at 4:30 p.m.



To contact the WSWs and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**