

# Auckland nurse denounces union's sellout deal in New Zealand

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There is growing anger and resentment among health workers over a sellout pay deal agreed early this month between the New Zealand Nurses Organisation (NZNO) and the country's District Health Boards, covering nearly 30,000 public hospital workers.

Conditions in the health system have deteriorated dramatically over the past decade. Following the global financial crisis of 2008 the then-National Party government effectively froze wages for nurses and other health workers and starved hospitals of funding for staff, building upgrades and other vital resources.

Nothing has been resolved since the election of a Labour Party-led government in October 2017. The new agreement maintains low wages, with an increase of just 3 percent per year for 2017–2019 for most nurses, midwives and healthcare assistants. Funding has been provided to increase staff numbers by a meagre 500 nationally.

The WSWs recently spoke to a nurse at Middlemore Hospital, which serves the working-class suburbs of South Auckland, an area of more than half a million people. According to the Counties Manukau District Health Board, over 192,000 people in the district live “in areas of high socioeconomic deprivation,” i.e., among the poorest 20 percent of the country. Many are Maori and immigrants from Asian and Pacific Island countries.

Media reports have detailed chronic overcrowding at Middlemore—the hospital was at or above 100 percent capacity for a third of 2017—as well as building leaks, severe mould and rot, asbestos and structural problems. Millions of dollars are urgently needed to carry out repairs and expand facilities at the hospital.

Work to build a new mental health unit had been underway but was abruptly stopped on August 1 after the company in charge, Ebert Construction, collapsed

with a debt of more than \$40 million. Hospital staff have not been told when construction will resume.

The nurse, who asked not to be named, told the WSWs that staff shortage had severe consequences at Middlemore Hospital. Last week an outbreak of swine flu in the mental health unit affected about seven patients and staff. New patients were admitted despite the outbreak. “They had nowhere else to place them so they stuck them in the ward,” she said, which was already “tightly packed.”

Management told the media that precautions had been taken, but the nurse said “management was blasé about it,” telling health workers it was “just like an ordinary flu” and there was no need for protective masks.

Staff are frequently overworked, often “getting maybe five hours of sleep. We are tired and you can’t give your all to the patients because of that.” Assaults are also common and made worse by lack of experienced staff. Workers have recently been bitten and punched by patients under the influence of drugs or suffering a mental health episode.

The nurse dismissed the government’s promise to hire more nurses, saying “a few years ago they said they were going to bring in more staff. They’re employing nurses all the time, but there’s an increase of people coming through the hospital that they don’t understand. What makes you think they’ll increase staff this time when they haven’t done that before?”

Lester Levy, former chairman of the three Auckland region District Health Boards, told a parliamentary committee in February that in the past five years resourcing of hospitals had not kept pace with population growth of 9.4 percent, an 18.8 per cent increase in emergency department admissions and 15 percent rise in in-patient discharges.

A major factor in the failure to retain staff is low pay,

the Middlemore nurse explained. “They’re paying us hardly anything, and then giving us more stuff that we have to do.” The cost of living in Auckland is out of control, with the average house price now over \$1 million, driven by a speculative property bubble.

The nurse said she had voted for the Labour Party, which promised to improve the health system and address inequality, but “next time I probably won’t vote. No matter who you vote for, they say what you want them to say at the beginning, but then they don’t do anything, and the only ones that get rich are rich already.”

She pointed out that Labour had said “we don’t have enough money” for a decent pay increase for health workers “but then, all of a sudden, they had millions of dollars going towards a yacht race and new jet planes for the air force.” This would have happened regardless of the election result, she added, because most governments “don’t care about anyone down at the bottom.”

The NZNO, she said, had “told nurses to go and vote for Labour because we were going to be heard, and a lot of nurses did vote for Labour, and now we’ve been slapped in the face again.”

She was scathing of the NZNO for pushing through the sellout agreement and noted that while the union said 64 percent of members voted in favour, it had not released the actual voting numbers. Most co-workers she had spoken to voted against the deal, which was virtually identical to two offers they previously rejected.

After workers rejected four separate offers and held a one-day strike, the union “couldn’t be bothered to keep going and get what the nurses wanted,” she said. “I think they’re absolute crap. NZNO and the other unions are supposed to be for their members but I believe they weren’t there for their members.

“When it comes to [union officials’] pay rises, it’s not like that goes to a vote from their members. A lot of them are on six figure salaries, whereas we’re struggling. They’re so blasé about everything, and I think it’s because as long as their pockets are getting lined, that’s all they care about.”

The nurse described the NZNO’s staffing arrangements during the July 12 strike as “an absolute joke.” Parts of Middlemore had “more staff than there would be usually”, she said, which “portrayed to the

public that the hospital could run just as well with thousands of staff out on strike.”

She also denounced the Public Service Association, New Zealand’s largest union, which has some hospital workers among its members but “just sat on their hands” during the walkout. “There was no push for any of the PSA members to go out there and close down the wards.”

In response to the Socialist Equality Group’s call for the establishment of rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions and democratically controlled by workers themselves, the nurse said: “I think it’s a good idea to try and get an organisation that’s actually going to do something and listen to the members.”

The SEG is holding an online forum on Saturday September 1 to discuss the lessons of the NZNO’s sellout, including the need for rank-and-file committees and for a socialist strategy to unite workers, in New Zealand and internationally, in a political and industrial campaign against austerity.



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