

Socialist Equality Group (New Zealand) forum reviews lessons of nursing union sellout

Our reporter
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On September 1, the Socialist Equality Group (New Zealand) held an online forum to discuss the lessons of the New Zealand Nurses Organisation's (NZNO) sellout deal imposed last month on nearly 30,000 nurses, midwives and healthcare assistants after a national strike in public hospitals.

The forum was attended by SEG members, students, health workers and members of the Socialist Equality Parties (SEP) of Britain and Australia. Participants emphasised that the fight for decent healthcare and other public services was international in scope and required the unification of workers' struggles globally.

The opening report by Tom Peters, a leading member of the SEG, explained that the 9 percent pay increase spread across 2017–2019, combined with a meagre 500 extra staff for the entire country, was a defeat for workers. "This means the continuation of brutal austerity measures that have starved the health system of funding for more than a decade, placing workers and patients at risk. The Labour Party-led government of Jacinda Ardern has made clear that it will not resolve the crisis," he said.

In many countries the working class is beginning to fight back against the attacks on its living conditions and public services imposed since the global financial crisis of 2008. Peters pointed to the widespread strikes by teachers in the United States. Parcel delivery workers and Amazon workers were also looking for ways to fight back, but workers were trapped inside unions that were hostile to their most basic interests.

The speaker urged health workers to "draw the necessary lessons" from the bitter experience they had gone through. "Health workers did not lack determination to fight, and they had widespread support throughout the working class. What was lacking was a clear political perspective to fight against the

government and the entire system of capitalism, which is defended by the unions."

Health workers were unable to break the stranglehold of the union, which wore down, demoralised and divided them to secure a majority in favour of the agreement, which was virtually identical to two offers workers had rejected.

"After union leaders failed to prevent the July 12 strike, they continued to repeat the government's blatant lie that there was 'no more money' to immediately address the problems in the health system," Peters said. "Yet just days before the strike the government announced \$2.3 billion would be spent on four new jet planes for the air force to help prepare the country for war."

Peters said the sellout demonstrated the need for workers to form rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions and controlled by workers themselves. Such committees would fight for workers' demands for safe staffing, a 20 percent pay increase, and billions of dollars for healthcare facilities, funded by a sharp increase in taxes on the rich.

"The committees will become powerful organising centres within hospitals, directly challenging the power of management and the unions to dictate how everything is run. They will also fight to unite with teachers, transport workers, meat workers and others," as well as workers in Britain, Australia and internationally.

Peters criticised the administrators of "New Zealand, Please hear our voice," a popular nurses' Facebook group, who urged workers to support the NZNO and deleted critical posts, including WSWs articles. "We call on the administrators to allow free discussion, including of a socialist perspective," he said.

Some nurses have formed an "NZNO members action

group” calling for the “democratisation” of the union. Peters warned that this perspective, backed by the pseudo-left group Socialist Aotearoa, is a dead-end. He noted that current NZNO president Grant Brookes falsely promised to democratise the organisation when he stood for the position three years ago. Since then he has acted as part of the union bureaucracy, helping to sell out nurses.

The NZNO Board, headed by Brookes, recently lashed out at nurses expressing anger at the union’s actions, threatening them with fines and disciplinary action.

“The unions cannot be reformed,” Peters said. “They are led by a privileged bureaucracy that has nothing in common with the workers it supposedly represents. Their job, for the past four decades, has been to help governments and employers suppress the working class and impose one betrayal after another.”

Ajanta Silva, a health worker and SEP member in Britain said the European unions were likewise assisting governments and corporations “hell-bent on the destruction of previous social gains, livelihoods, pay and working conditions.”

In Britain, “health workers, like other public sector workers, have not had a real pay rise for eight years,” Silva said. “In March, 13 health unions negotiated a pay deal with the government and sold it to their members stating it was ‘the best deal in eight years.’” The head of the Royal College of Nursing, Janet Davies, resigned at the end of August following outrage over the union’s misrepresentation of the deal, which consisted of a 6.5 percent increase over three years—well below the rising cost of living.

The SEP’s National Health Service (NHS) Fightback campaign, Silva explained, is fighting to build rank-and-file committees “to unite all sections of the working class in defence of a free, comprehensive health service and the immediate end to the outsourcing and privatisation of the NHS, the nationalisation of Big Pharma and billions of pounds investment in healthcare and other vital social services.”

Michelle, a nurse and a member of the SEP (Australia), raised that the need for safe nurse-to-patient ratios in hospitals was “at the forefront of nurses’ demands internationally,” but had been ignored by the NZNO.

SEG member John Braddock said pseudo-left backers

of the unions falsely claimed that the Labour government could be pressured to “loosen the purse strings” in the interests of workers. In fact, Prime Minister Ardern had responded to the wages movement in the working class by reassuring business leaders that Labour was “listening” to their concerns and would not undermine their profits.

Peters concluded by calling on workers and students to help build the SEG into the New Zealand section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, the world Trotskyist movement. This was the only way to build a socialist and internationalist movement, capable of resolving the crisis of political leadership in the working class and waging a real fight against austerity and militarism.



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