

Irish nurses' union seeks to impose settlement after calling off strike

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Almost 40,000 Irish nurses and midwives will vote in early March on whether to accept the proposed Labour Court (LC) and Irish Nurses & Midwives Organisation (INMO) pay settlement. After holding three separate days of strikes in early February, the INMO on February 11 called off three further continuous days of strikes.

The INMO is collaborating with the government and the Health Service Executive in working to sell out the struggle of its members for a decent pay rise and better working conditions. Nurses and midwives demanded a 12 percent pay increase, but the deal agreed by the LC and the INMO offers most nurses a mere 2.5 percent.

The INMO National Executive will hold meetings over the next few weeks at which officials will outline the terms of the LC proposal and try to sell their deal.

The LC ruling proposes new pay grades into which many nurses could transfer, and while some nurses would see rises of 7 percent, this figure includes increases these nurses are already due under existing agreements. This means that 26,000 nurses and midwives are, in fact, being offered only 2.5 percent.

The LC ruling also calls for an “expert” review of nursing by 2020 and includes proposals for a new contract that would extract greater productivity from nurses by forcing them to work in the community, outside their hospitals. Although the nurses called the strike to secure pay parity with other health workers, the LC ruling rejects this out of hand.

Over the past 10 years, many nurses have seen their income slashed by a quarter. Poor working conditions and staff shortages have led to Irish nurses emigrating to the US, Canada and Australia. The anger and frustration among nurses were reflected in the 95 percent vote for a strike at the beginning of the year.

There was also huge support for the strike from the general working class population. Working people, who are worried about the state of the crippled Irish health

service, have rejected the corporate press bias against the nurses. A demonstration in support of the nurses held on February 9 attracted as many as 45,000 people to central Dublin.

One clinical nurse manager supporting the demonstration told the *Irish Times*, “In my unit the vast majority of nurses are in their 40s and 50s. The 20- and 30-year-olds, they are not here, they’re not in Ireland. So it is about safe staffing, it is about safe patient care. Every day procedures are cancelled because there aren’t enough nurses.”

On February 11, when the strike was called off by the INMO at the behest of the LC and the Fine Gael government, nurses were left with no information. There was a furious reaction on social media from health care workers who had manned picket lines. Many called the deal an insult.

Just after the INMO pulled the plug on the strike, a group of nurses on an afternoon phone-in radio show were asked if “the general reaction from nurses was negative as regards the deal.” Nurse Catherine Gavney replied, “We haven’t been spoken to by our union. We have nothing. We’re only reading what you’re reading. The cabinet was informed this morning the broad outline of how much it would cost, but we, the nurses, have not been told.”

Asked was she angry at the INMO calling off the strike, she replied, “I would like to have had all the information. Is that a ploy—I don’t know—by either the government or INMO?”

Rebecca from Dublin University Hospital said, “I’m on my own, and I cannot afford a one-bedroom apartment in Kildare or Meath, never mind Dublin.”

When asked about the LC ruling, she replied, “We were looking for parity. If we had even got our pay restoration since before the recession that would bring us up near to parity. I just think it’s really disrespectful. I know the media tried to blacken the nurses for what they were

doing by saying oncology cases were being cancelled, but the truth is oncology cases are being cancelled every day.”

Brid, from Drogheda, County Louth, a retired nurse, said the deal should have restored the 15 percent pay cut taken at the height of the recession. She added, “This will successfully create a divide between everyone. I was shocked that there wasn’t consideration for pay restoration to be given back.”

The deal was concocted by the LC, which intervened nominally as a neutral body, but which functions as an arm of the state and has a history of opposition to workers’ claims. The unions and the LC work as a double act in attempting to keep workers’ demands checked and locked within the confines of right-wing government policy.

The chairman and the four deputy chairmen of the LC are appointed by the minister for business, enterprise and innovation. The employers’ members are nominated by IBEC (Irish Business and Employers’ Confederation), and those members fraudulently claiming to represent the interests of workers are nominated by the Irish Congress of Trades Unions (ICTU).

The Socialist Equality Group (SEG) calls on nurses to decisively reject this sellout, organise independently of the union bureaucracy and prepare for a national strike.

The INMO will continue to do the bidding of the government and the super-rich.

The urgent task facing health workers is to forge links with other workers—particularly other public service workers, who have seen living standards fall—in Ireland and internationally. This requires a rebellion against the trade union bureaucracy and the formation of rank-and-file committees controlled by workers themselves and committed to a struggle for the provision of decent health, social care and high living standards for all. This requires a political struggle for a socialist programme to reorganise society on the basis of social equality.



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