

New Zealand nurses voice anger over union's limited strike plan

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Following a ballot of 30,000 nurses and health care assistants, the NZ Nurses Organisation (NZNO) issued a statement on May 14 declaring members had voted “overwhelmingly” for an eight-hour strike on June 9.

The vote followed the rejection of a paltry 1.38 percent pay offer from the country's 20 District Health Boards (DHBs), which is under the rate of inflation.

The ballot was already underway when, on May 5, the Labour-Green Party government announced a three-year wage freeze across the public sector. Workers earning more than \$NZ60,000 will be offered increases only under “exceptional” circumstances, while increases for those on salaries over \$100,000 are ruled out. Only a quarter of public servants earn less than \$60,000.

Finance Minister Grant Robertson said “restraint” was necessary to keep a lid on public debt, which had skyrocketed during the pandemic to pay for “expensive” measures like the “wage subsidy” scheme—in reality a multi-billion-dollar handout to big business.

Tens of thousands of doctors, nurses, teachers, social workers, border staff and others will be hit by the freeze. Most have already had increases below inflation, with pay packets eaten up by escalating house prices, rents and basic living costs. The median weekly income fell by 7.6 percent in the 12 months to June 2020.

NZNO spokesman David Wait said nurses were “angry and frustrated” at the pay offer made “despite the incredible sacrifices they made in 2020 to keep the country safe from COVID-19.” He said health workers had been labouring under “horrific and unsafe staffing conditions for a long time, made much worse by the pandemic.”

The NZNO, however, like other unions, celebrated Labour's re-election last October. NZNO president Heather Symes sought to bolster illusions in the government, declaring in a statement: “We both want the same thing—a first-rate health system where people are

cared for as best as possible, and in which every health worker is safe and fairly paid.”

In fact, the NZNO is complicit in imposing intolerable conditions and abysmal pay rates. In 2018, the union had to overcome widespread opposition among members who held an historic nationwide strike against a series of sellout offers. The union leadership echoed the Ardern government's lies that there was no money to properly fund hospitals. It pushed through a deal containing a 3 percent annual pay increase and ignored members' demands for safe staffing levels.

The NZNO is now preparing a similar betrayal. The NZNO initially asked for a pay increase of 17 percent but given its record, the union will undoubtedly seek to accommodate the government's pay directive. Despite the overwhelming strike vote, the union immediately returned to talks with the DHBs on May 18-19, promising to “actively search for solutions that could avert strike action.”

Everything is being done to minimise any disruption. The June 9 strike is scheduled to begin at 11.00am and straddle the afternoon shift change. The nominal eight-hour stoppage will see each group of workers walk out for four hours, with nothing affecting the night shift. Nurses staffing COVID-19 quarantine facilities are exempt and the union will approve nurses for “life preserving services” (LPS) which last time saw several hospitals well-staffed during the strike.

The NZNO's stance is provoking growing disgust, aired particularly in the Facebook group “New Zealand, please hear our voice” established by nurses during the 2018 pay fight. It has some 39,000 members.

After asking, “How is everyone feeling about the strike?” Terri received a flood of responses including: “Not long enough,” “Think we need to plan a few more,” “Too little too late,” “This strike will be over before it starts sad but true” and “We need to do it, but provision

should be made to have rolling strikes ... until we get a fair deal.”

Ryan posted that he was not an NZNO member but supported the strike, declaring: “This is a nursing issue, not a union popularity contest. I do feel that soft negotiations have been the downfall of nursing in general.” His post received nearly 1,000 “likes” and over 100 comments.

Arihia said: “I’m not an NZNO member either, & also support the strike. I left due to the lack of strength & negotiating ability at the most important levels of the union.” Arihia declared that the DHBs and union work in tandem to wear nurses down and “give in to poor offers.”

Michelle said the eight-hour strike “is not enough,” with the timing “a convenience for the DHB.” Nurses will have completed essential morning tasks such as distributing medication, washing patients and serving breakfasts by the time the strike begins.

Aileen added: “Absolutely agree!!! I just wondered how they come up with the time of the strike 1100-1900. My first thought was ‘Is this a joke?’ How will it make an impact???”

Donald criticised the union’s practice of providing LPS, saying “that makes our strike a big joke. They are more full-staffed when we are on strikes!”

The determination of nurses to carry forward their struggle is part of an international upsurge of workers across the globe, including health workers who are standing in defence of patients and society at large as the COVID-19 pandemic continues to rage.

New Zealand nurses, along with other sections of workers, including bus drivers, are in a political confrontation with the austerity agenda of the Ardern government. They are pitted against a treacherous trade union apparatus that does not work in their interests but defends the government and subordinates healthcare to the requirements of capitalism.

The NZNO has imposed betrayal after betrayal over decades. Following the 2018 sellout, which provoked widespread disgust among members and many resignations, the union indulged in a show of blood-letting, including the resignation of its chief executive Memo Musa.

Factional warfare erupted in early 2020 when NZNO President Grant Brookes resigned, along with supporters from the governing board. Brookes, a former member of the pseudo-left group Fightback and Maori nationalist Mana Party, painted himself as the victim of “shadowy forces” within the NZNO.

Brookes, who was central to imposing the 2018 sellout, now hypocritically postures as a rank-and-file “opponent” of the leadership. He represents a section of the leadership alarmed that most nurses see the union for what it is: a tool of the government and DHB managements that is totally hostile to its members. Brookes and others are desperately seeking to hoodwink workers that the unions can somehow be “democratised.”

A measure of the class gulf that separates the union bureaucrats from ordinary nurses can be found in the union’s annual reports. In 2018 the WSWs reported that 28 NZNO officials were paid more than \$100,000 a year. Last year, 42 officials were paid more than \$100,000, and another 30 between \$90,000 and \$99,000. That is, 72 highly-paid people have increased their bloated salaries while collaborating with the attacks on working conditions and wages of nurses.

The impasse facing nurses cannot be resolved by substituting one set of “leaders,” or one union, for another. The pro-capitalist trade unions ceased to be genuine workers’ organisations decades ago. They represent a privileged upper middle class layer, which works with big business and the government to suppress the class struggle and impose wage cuts, layoffs and other attacks.

This underscores the urgent need for new organisations—rank-and-file committees independent of the union and controlled by hospital workers themselves—to organise a fightback against austerity by linking up with other workers in New Zealand and internationally. Above all, workers must fight for the socialist reorganisation of society, based on social need, not profit.



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