

# New Zealand nurses vote on derisory “revised” pay offer

**John Braddock****2 June 2021**

On May 31, the New Zealand Nurses Organisation (NZNO), presented a revised pay offer to some 30,000 nurses and healthcare assistants, including a \$4,000 cash inducement, on behalf of the country’s 20 District Health Boards (DHBs). The union has given its members in public hospitals until next Tuesday to decide whether to accept or reject the deal.

The offer is a desperate bid by the DHBs, in concert with the NZNO, to avert an eight-hour nationwide strike scheduled for June 9. Last month NZNO members voted overwhelmingly to reject the DHBs’ initial offer, of a 1.38 percent rise, which is under the rate of inflation, and authorised the strike. The NZNO had initially asked for a pay increase of 17 percent.

NZNO lead advocate David Wait said it was now “up to members to decide” on the new deal, but it is clear that the union is hoping it will be accepted. Wait declared that even if the strike were now called off, it would not have been “a wasted effort.” “The threat of strike action is what swayed the DHBs to present this revised offer,” he said.

While nurses voted solidly for the union’s proposed strike, many turned to social media to criticise it as totally inadequate and a “joke.” The limited stoppage will begin at 11.00am and straddle an afternoon shift change, meaning each group of workers will be out for just 4 hours while the night shift is unaffected. Nurses working in COVID-19 quarantine facilities are exempt.

The ballot was already underway when, on May 5, the Labour-Green Party government announced a three-year wage freeze across the entire public sector. Workers earning more than \$NZ60,000 which includes most nurses, will be offered increases only under “exceptional” circumstances. Widespread fury at the pay freeze intensified nurses’ opposition and consolidated support for the strike.

Despite the powerful vote, the NZNO immediately went back into negotiations with the DHBs, promising to “actively search for solutions that could avert strike action.” The new offer is the product of these behind-closed-doors negotiations.

The deal is both a sham and an insult. The \$4,000 lump sum inducement is pro-rata, taxable and only available to NZNO members. It is not “new” money, but an “advance” on the union’s pay equity back-pay claim, which would eventually be recouped. This bureaucratic pay equity process, agreed in 2018 as a diversion from the union’s sellout over its contract claim, purports to assess nurses’ pay rates against comparable “male-dominated” professions. Successive Labour Party governments have promised to provide pay equity for nurses since the 1980s, but never delivered.

The revised pay offer contains no substantial increases in salaries beyond those rejected by nurses. A \$1,200 annual increase for senior nurses and nurse practitioners will be brought forward from May 2022 to November 2021. Hospital-based midwives get a 1.25 increase from May 2021; a \$1,200 annual increase from November 1, and a further \$1,200 increase from October next year. Also included is provision for family violence leave and a hollow promise to “speed up” safe staffing implementation.

That the NZNO did not reject this offer out of hand demonstrates that the union is organising yet another betrayal. There are echoes of 2018, when the union presented a series of sellout offers, in order to wear down its members and persuade them that the government had “no money” for decent pay and conditions. Amid significant opposition, the NZNO finally pushed through a deal containing a 3 percent annual pay increase, while ignoring demands for safe

staffing levels.

Given its record, the NZNO will undoubtedly seek to accommodate the Labour government's pay directive. Led by the NZ Council of Trade Unions, the state sector unions initially responded to the anger among workers by posturing that they would "not take this lying down."

Union leaders soon fell into line. Emerging from a meeting with ministers on May 11, they claimed a "victory," on the bogus basis that the government would review its "guidance" at the end of next year, and made vague promises that there was still "scope to discuss" cost-of-living increases in collective pay agreements. While existing step-based pay increments will apply, the NZNO says many workers are already at or near the top step of their pay scale, with no room to move up.

The NZNO claims that Public Service Minister Chris Hipkins assured them pay bargaining could still be "conducted in good faith." In fact, while insisting that Labour's policy was one of pay "restraint," rather than a "freeze," Hipkins told the media his expectations had "not changed." The government will continue with its brutal austerity agenda, which the unions will enforce.

New Zealand nurses are seeking to carry forward their struggle amid 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.

These global conditions were highlighted in the case of the intensive care nurse, New Zealander Jenny McGee, who was credited for keeping vigil over British Prime Minister Boris Johnson when he was gravely ill in St Thomas' hospital, London in April 2020. McGee quit last month, denouncing conditions at the hospital as "an absolute shitshow," and condemning the Tory government's "lack of respect" for health workers.

New Zealand's public healthcare system is in a similar crisis. Despite the ongoing danger posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, Prime Minister Ardern's government has refused to address the dire lack of staffing and capacity in the hospitals. The priority of the ruling coalition has been to protect the wealthy from the consequences of the economic crisis, at the expense of essential services, including healthcare.

TVNZ reported on May 22 that hospital emergency departments (EDs) are "teetering on crisis point."

There are not enough beds, with patients being placed on the floor, in corridors on stretchers, or in the back of ambulances. Admissions to Christchurch hospital's ED spiked by 18 percent, to over 29,000 cases in three months. Elective surgeries are being delayed. Sandy Richardson, who has worked in emergency for over 30 years, said, "For a long time the health system has been underfunded. We don't have the resources, we don't have the capacity."

The Socialist Equality Group (NZ) calls on health workers to decisively reject the latest contract offer, and to widen their struggle with a turn to other workers, who are also moving into struggle over wages and conditions. Last month, Wellington bus drivers also voted to reject a second pay offer from NZ Bus, which included a \$10,000 cash "bonus," and approved a fresh round of strikes.

Workers cannot place any confidence in the Ardern government or the trade unions. The pro-capitalist unions ceased to be genuine workers' organisations decades ago. They represent a privileged upper middle class layer, which works with big business and the state to suppress the class struggle and impose wage cuts, layoffs and other attacks.

There is an urgent need for new organisations—rank-and-file committees independent of the unions, 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 re-organisation of society, based on social need, not profit.



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