

New Zealand nurses reject third union-backed pay deal

John Braddock, Tom Peters
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About 30,000 nurses and health care assistants voted last week to reject the latest pay offer from the 20 District Health Boards (DHBs), which was backed by the New Zealand Nurses Organisation (NZNO).

The rejection of the sellout deal by what the NZNO described as a “clear majority,” is a setback for both the union and the Labour-led government, which is attempting to impose a three-year pay freeze across the public sector. The NZNO confirmed that two strikes previously approved by members, on August 19 and September 9-10, will go ahead “unless an acceptable offer is made.”

Nurses held a nationwide strike on June 9 after rejecting two previous offers that would have increased wages by just 1.38 percent, less than half the 3.3 percent inflation rate. The NZNO provoked widespread anger when it cancelled a strike scheduled for July 29 before presenting the revised agreement for a vote.

The latest offer did not address low wages or the increasingly desperate staffing crisis in public hospitals caused by decades of underfunding. The NZNO initially claimed it was pushing for a pay increase of 17 percent over two years but the proposed salary increase is just \$1,800 and a back-payment of \$1,200.

The union attempted to disguise the rotten deal by including money from an entirely separate “pay equity” deal, still under negotiation, which will purportedly bring nurses’ salaries to match similar male-dominated professions.

By conflating the “pay equity adjustment” with the salary offer, the NZNO claimed that base rates will go up by \$5,800 (7.5 percent for a nurse at the top of the pay scale). A lump sum payment of \$6,000, funded through the pay equity settlement, is an “advance” to be recouped when the deal is finalised.

Nurses have rejected the entire charade. But that did not prevent NZNO advocate David Wait falsely claiming,

after the vote, that the DHBs had made “promising moves” on pay.

According to Wait, the nurses primarily rejected the deal because it was not clear how DHBs will be held “accountable” if they do not provide safe staffing. “Nurses don’t want more vague promises that the problem will be fixed in the future,” he declared.

In fact, the contract provisions governing hospital staffing allocations were written with the collaboration of the NZNO. Pledges of “transparency” and “accountability,” which do not commit the government to anything, were part of the sellout deal pushed through by the NZNO in 2018, despite widespread opposition from nurses.

The intransigence of nurses and healthcare assistants has rattled the Labour-Green Party government. Health Minister Andrew Little took the unusual step of holding a press conference to denounce the outcome. Attempting to browbeat the nurses, Little declared that the forthcoming strikes will be “hugely disruptive to public health services, and to the people who need them.”

Little made the revealing comment that “the proposal was one [the union] put to the government. The Nurses Organisation members have rejected their own union’s proposal.” In a Radio NZ interview, Wait tried to deny this, claiming that “we don’t recommend deals to our members, our members make the decisions all by themselves.”

However, the NZNO took the offer to its members for a vote, cancelled a planned strike without asking members, and claimed in a press statement on July 16 that “significant progress has been made in negotiations with the district health boards.”

The union told members at the start of negotiations that it was seeking a pay increase of 17 percent over two years. The reality is the union leadership worked with the government to come up with a proposal to effectively

freeze wages and staffing levels, setting a benchmark for attacks across the public sector.

The NZNO is in fact following the same playbook it employed in the 2018 sell-out, when it presented multiple inadequate deals designed to wear workers down, isolate them and convince them that no better deal was possible.

Little was forced to admit under questioning that only half the 20 DHBs have met the requirements to manage safe staffing levels agreed to in 2018. But he still insisted that there are “already enforceable” measures in place with “accountability mechanisms.” In fact, hospitals are in crisis, frequently operating at up to 120 percent capacity, with emergency departments regularly overwhelmed.

There is immense anger among nurses towards the government, as shown during the June 9 strike when Little was booed off the stage outside parliament. He has now launched a social media campaign to portray nurses as greedy and unreasonable, prompting hundreds of angry comments.

Phil wrote on Little’s Facebook page: “Andrew, stop acting like Donald Trump. Firstly, the nurses are worth much more than this, and secondly, safe staffing levels is the major impasse... the government doesn’t hold the moral high ground in this discussion.”

Kaewyn commented that she previously supported the Minister, but “what you have said today and how you have twisted and manipulated the facts is just disgusting. You are trying to turn public opinions against nurses with your nasty rhetoric. I work within the health system and I know the facts of how unsafe it actually is... it’s terrifying.”

Deborah wrote: “We should not have to fight this hard for safe working conditions. Safe staffing has been talked about for the entire span of my nursing career, and it’s worse now than it ever was. Stop promising and start doing!”

Little, a former leader of the Engineering Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU), has been tasked with leading Labour’s assault on a key section of the working class. He is also the minister in charge of re-sealing the Pike River mine in order to bury critical evidence of the causes of the explosion that killed 29 miners in 2010. As head of the EPMU at the time, Little played a key role in covering up the culpability of the company.

The Labour Party-led government, like others around the world, is now imposing austerity measures to pay for its pro-business response to the economic crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic. The Ardern government has

handed over tens of billions of dollars in subsidies for businesses, while the Reserve Bank printed billions more to purchase bonds from the commercial banks.

The trade unions are determined to suppress the growing confrontation and prevent nurses from linking up with other sections of the working class who are seeking to fight back against the endless attacks on living standards.

Other sections of the health workforce, including doctors, midwives and technicians, are now entering into fresh struggles. Along with nurses, they are part of an international upsurge of the working class triggered by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. In every country, workers confront not only managements and governments, but the trade unions, which act as the industrial police force.

To take forward their struggle, healthcare workers need to build new organisations: rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions, and democratically run by workers themselves. These committees would fight for demands that actually address the needs of hospital staff and patients. These include: a mandatory safe staffing ratio, the recruitment of thousands more healthcare workers, and an immediate pay increase of at least 20 percent.

Above all, healthcare workers must adopt a socialist perspective, in opposition to the entire political establishment. The billions of dollars funnelled to the super-rich, through handouts and low taxes, must be re-appropriated and urgently used to boost essential public services, including health. This is the program of the Socialist Equality Group (NZ).

We urge workers who agree with this perspective to contact us.



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