

Western Australian state Labor government applies to Industrial Relations Commission to shut down nurses' action

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The Health Workers Rank-and-File Committee and the Committee for Public Education are holding a joint online public meeting on Sunday, November 20 at 3 p.m. (AEDT).

Titled, "Unite educators and health workers: Oppose the ending of COVID protection measures! Lives before profit!" the meeting will outline a political perspective, including the building of rank-and-file committees, to unify health workers, educators and other sections of workers. Register now: <https://bit.ly/3CRCuOh>

The Western Australian (WA) state Labor government has applied to the industrial courts to stop the ongoing action of public nurses and midwives in the Australian Nurses Federation (ANF) over a new enterprise bargaining agreement (EBA). Nurses voted last week to reject the governments' offer for a second time.

The offer would see a three percent pay rise, well below the current 7.3 percent official inflation rate and a nurse-to-patient ratios model that would be implemented in two years. WA also reported that the draft agreement contained the clause that gave employers a way out of implementing the ratios, stating that that the parties acknowledged "current national and global workforce pressures and the impacts this may have on the employer's ability to implement the WA ratio model."

The move by the McGowan government to apply to the Industrial Relations Commission highlights its commitment to implementing an austerity agenda, in line with the budget handed down by the Albanese Labor federal government in October, which revealed that payments to the states and territories for public hospitals are expected to decrease by more than \$755 million this financial year and \$2.4 billion over four years.

The WA Industrial Relations Commission (IRC), like its federal counterpart, the Fair Work Commission, is a

pro-business tribunal that has repeatedly upheld attacks on workers' pay and conditions. These decisions have been systematically enforced over decades by the trade unions, who have mounted no opposition to real-wage cuts and assaults on conditions imposed.

Nurses will commence rolling stoppages next week, following four weeks of limited work bans on overtime and double shifts, as part of a planned seven weeks of escalating industrial action in response to the government's offer.

Whilst nurses are demanding a 10 percent pay increase, as well as the introduction of legislated nurse-to-patient ratios, the union has signalled its willingness to stitch up an agreement with the McGowan government that slashes workers' wages and conditions.

The former ANF secretary Mark Olson, who retired in May this year to take up a newly established CEO position in the union, has said he felt the deal was about 80 to 90 percent complete without meeting the nurses' pay claim, but that the government needed to make ratios enforceable immediately.

Olson told the *Sunday Times*, in October, "I don't think any of our members expect the government to agree to a 10 percent wage increase," and that the demand was, "A measure of the frustration and anger of nurses."

His comments express the contempt of the entire trade union bureaucracy for its rank-and-file members. Similarly, at a stopwork meeting of NSW nurses in June, the then-general secretary of the NSW Nurses and Midwives' Association, Brett Holmes, opposed a motion from the floor for nurses to demand an annual pay rise of seven percent, declaring, "Feel free to roll me [i.e., vote against him], I'm in a much better financial position at my end of my career than you are."

The WA public health system is in crisis. Last week, the

West Australian reported that the state had already reached its worst annual ambulance ramping figures on record, in just ten months. The state's public hospitals have the lowest number of beds per capita in the country.

Even prior to the ending of COVID-19 safety measures this year, the health system was at breaking point. Ambulance ramping reached 52,000 hours in 2021, more than double the number of hours in 2020. These conditions have now been worsened by the adoption of "let it rip" COVID policies by the McGowen government, with the full support of the trade unions. The decision to allow the virus to spread in WA has resulted in a surge of deaths from nine in the two years to February 2022, to the current total of 720.

The union has dragged out the current dispute, ensuring that nurses' action has remained as limited as possible, delaying strike action. The nurses' action eventually includes "closing one-in-five beds" and "indefinite strike action" in the seventh week. However, the union is doing everything possible to enforce a sell-out deal with the government prior to this.

Olson has said that the McGowen government could expect nurses to defy any order by the IRC, saying, "The Commission may issue orders that again may be ignored by the nurses and midwives, as happened in 2013."

In 2013, while nurses defied an IRC order to end their week-long bans, which had closed one in five hospital beds, the ANF swiftly called off the strike on the basis of a sell-out deal with Liberal Party Premier Colin Barnett, which included a pay rise that was significantly less than the wages claim endorsed by nurses.

The ANF's objective has been to wear down nurses, in order to ram through a sell-out agreement that resolves none of their demands. They have systematically isolated their action from the rallies by other sections of public sector workers, including health workers and enrolled nurses covered by the United Workers Union, who face the same attack on their wages and conditions.

In a warning to nurses of the sell-out being prepared, the United Workers Union, which covers thousands of health workers, last month forced through a sell-out deal with the McGowan government. The union urged its membership to "vote yes" to the agreement, which included the below-inflation 3 percent wage "increase."

Speaking to the press outside the IRC, ANF secretary Janet Reah signalled the union's willingness to accept the same kind of sell-out, saying, "A lot of other unions have already accepted that offer so we haven't got that strength in numbers that we would have had five months ago."

In reality, the ANF has systematically blocked nurses from uniting their action with those of other public sector workers, including other health workers. Throughout the course of the dispute, the unions have organised separate actions on different days and times.

The other branches of the nurses' unions have likewise systematically isolated and limited industrial action. New South Wales Nurses and Midwives' Association (NSWNMA), where nurses similarly confront a 3 percent wage cap and have gone on strike four times this year. Teachers and rail workers have also taken industrial action, defying the attempted suppression by the industrial courts and the government.

Despite growing calls from workers for a unified struggle, the unions have ensured that the actions have been kept separate, confined to different days and locations, as well as refusing to unite the struggles of workers across the country, who face the same intolerable conditions.

The struggles of health workers cannot go forward within the straitjacket of the unions. Instead, workers must form rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions, to reach out to fellow workers in other states and internationally to oppose the profit drive of big business governments and fight for decent living standards, working conditions, and an end to the COVID-19 pandemic.



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