

West Australian nurses denounce union sellout and state Labor government gag

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Amid resurging COVID infections and rising anger among health workers and educators, the Health Workers Rank-and-File Committee and the Committee for Public Education are holding a joint online public meeting tomorrow, 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 against government wage-cutting, intolerable workloads and unsafe pandemic conditions. Register now: <https://bit.ly/3CRCuOh>

Nurses in Western Australia have responded with fury to a proposed sellout by their union of their fight for decent pay and nurse-to-patient ratios, and a gag order then imposed on the union by the state Labor government.

After announcing a deal with Premier Mark McGowan’s government on Tuesday, and abruptly calling off planned strike action without any consultation with members, Australian Nursing Federation (ANF) leaders were booed at nurses’ meetings and deluged with texts, emails and other messages by nurses denouncing the blatant betrayal.

Following two days of silence, ANF state secretary Janet Reah performed a supposed backflip, declaring that the government’s offer was “insulting” and “divisive.” Saying nurses had flooded the union with hostile responses, she said members were likely to vote down the agreement.

In response to the nurses’ rebellion, the Labor government rushed to the state Industrial Relations Commission (IRC) yesterday to obtain an order delaying the ballot on the deal until November 28 and banning the union’s employees from making any public comments that push for a better offer, or encourage members to vote against the agreement.

This gag is a frontal assault by a Labor government on the basic democratic rights of the working class to oppose government and employer attacks, as well as on workers’ right to strike, which is already severely restricted by state and federal anti-strike laws.

The furious revolt by nurses against the ANF sellout is

another indicator that all the trade unions are having increasing difficulty in suppressing the brewing discontent throughout the working class over the soaring cost of living, continued real pay cuts and intolerable workloads, now being intensified by the resurgence of the COVID-19 pandemic.

On the other side of the continent, the New South Wales (NSW) nursing union has been forced to call a fifth statewide stoppage this year next Wednesday, this time for a full 24 hours, to head off rank-and-file anger over the continuing rejection of their basic demands by that state’s Liberal-National government.

NSW nurses are demanding minimum shift-by-shift nurse-to-patient ratios of 3:1 in emergency departments and 4:1 in the wards, and a 7 percent pay increase. NSW teachers and rail workers have also taken repeated industrial action, defying suppression by the industrial court and the state government.

All across the country, and internationally, there is seething anger among health workers and others, including teachers, over unbearable conditions including chronic underfunding and unrelenting and unsafe workloads, exacerbated by the profit-driven “let it rip” pandemic policy of capitalist governments.

Public hospitals have been buckling throughout the pandemic, with thousands of health workers struck down by COVID, resulting in dangerous emergency department delays and record levels of ambulance “ramping”—i.e., patients being held in ambulances outside hospitals for hours on end.

Western Australia (WA) nurses were due to start rolling stoppages this week when ANF state chief executive and former state secretary Mark Olson called them off at the eleventh hour, despite the government not budging from its 3 percent public sector-wide annual wage rise offer—less than half the official inflation rate of 7.3 percent.

Olson was jeered at what he condemned as a “largely hostile” meeting of nurses and midwives at Perth’s Fiona Stanley Hospital on Wednesday, and again at the ANF’s

annual general meeting on Thursday, which he shut down after an hour.

Outraged comments on the ANF Facebook site provide a picture of the unrest. “This govt is under a dictatorship. Too much power, so little heart,” one nurse wrote. Another said: “I feel bullied by our government ... We have to continue fighting for better pay and safer working conditions. Nurses, never, never give up.”

As soon as the IRC’s gag edict became known, the fury deepened. “This is absolutely appalling. I’m bloody angry right now. Invalidating our votes WTF! Next they’ll lock the doors so we have to stay at work,” one nurse posted.

Another commented: “This call to stand down by the IRC is unprecedented. Obviously they are in bed with the labour/McGowan camp. Unfortunately for them, we nurses are not.”

Other posts included: “So the Labor party has become a union busting organisation? What an absolute disgrace and affront to democracy,” “Has WA become an autocracy all if a sudden... I’m utterly appalled and bewildered..., STRIKE!!!” and “Disgusting!!!! Shame on you Mark McGowan!!!! I backed you through some of the darkest days as a nurse and this is the thanks we get!!!!”

The nurses have voted for industrial action to demand a 10 percent annual pay rise and nurse-to-patient ratios, but the ANF is still trying to strike a deal with the government for much less. Even as Reah belatedly described the government’s latest offer as “insulting,” she said the union would push for a 5 percent rise.

In a warning 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 that included the below-inflation 3 percent wage “increase.”

McGowan again displayed his contempt for the nurses and other public sector workers. While banning union officials from comment, he insisted that nurses should accept the agreement reached with the ANF. “It is a terrific arrangement that we’ve reached cooperatively,” he said.

The government’s “improved offer” agreed by the ANF merely added \$1,200 annual pay allowances to the two most common levels of nurses and midwives, and promised a possibly quicker timetable for some nurse-to-patient ratios to be introduced over the next two years.

The McGowan government’s vicious response is not just a Western Australian issue. It is in line with the Albanese Labor federal government’s first budget, handed down on October 25, which revealed that payments to the states and territories for public hospitals are expected to decrease by \$2.4 billion over four years.

That is part of an historic attack on working-class living

standards—an austerity agenda of cutting real wages and social spending to make workers pay for the skyrocketing global inflation and economic slump triggered by the uncontrolled pandemic and the US proxy war against Russia in Ukraine.

Yesterday too, on the same day as the WA IRC gag edict, its pro-business federal counterpart, the Fair Work Commission (FWC), ordered a six-month suspension of all industrial action by Svitzer tugboat workers nationally over the four-year enterprise bargaining dispute.

While the FWC, at the behest of the Albanese government, halted a planned indefinite lockout of almost 600 workers by Svitzer—to avoid an explosive confrontation that would have ignited opposition throughout the working class—it stripped the Svitzer workers of their right to strike, even under the draconian anti-strike laws imposed by the last federal Labor government and the unions in 2009.

Such decisions by industrial tribunals have been enforced for decades by the unions, shutting down workers’ struggles against real wage cuts and assaults on conditions. But the resort to these dictatorial measures now reflects the fear held by the Labor governments and throughout the ruling class more broadly, that the unions can no longer be relied upon to deliver the class-war agenda required by the financial elite.

Cynically claiming to want to “get wages moving,” the Albanese government is trying to rush through parliament an industrial relations bill that would grant the FWC even greater powers to shut down industrial action.

Despite growing calls from workers for a unified fight, the unions have ensured that the actions have been kept separate, refusing to unite the struggles of workers across the country.

To launch a counter-offensive, workers need to break out of the straitjacket of the unions. That means organising rank-and-file committees, democratically controlled by workers and completely independent of the union bureaucrats, to reach out to workers nationally 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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