

Australia: West Australian nurses to strike for 24 hours, defying industrial court and Labor government

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On Friday, thousands of public sector nurses in Western Australia (WA) will strike for 24 hours, defying a ban ordered by the Industrial Relations Commission (IRC) and the efforts of the Australian Nursing Federation (ANF) to impose a sellout.

The strike follows an overwhelming rejection, by 84 percent of nurses, of the state Labor government's offer of a 3 percent wage "increase"—really a pay cut, under conditions of a 7.3 percent inflation rate—and a nurse-to-patient ratio model that would not be implemented for another two years.

The vote was a powerful demonstration of nurses' opposition to successive pay cuts, as well as intolerable working conditions as a result of chronic staff shortages exacerbated by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. It is also an expression of a broader determination of workers to fight, throughout the country and internationally. The strike will take place just two days after the fifth statewide stoppage this year by public sector nurses and midwives in New South Wales, Australia's most populous state.

On November 15, the ANF announced the in-principle deal and called off planned strike action without any consultation with members. This was met with seething anger and hostility from nurses, forcing the ANF to call a vote on the deal.

In a wholesale assault on the basic democratic and industrial rights of workers, the McGowan Labor government rushed to the IRC to obtain a ruling preventing union employees from calling for a no vote, and ordering that the ballot be delayed until November 28.

It was only the fury of nurses that compelled the ANF to defy the order and proceed with the vote. Like every

other union, the ANF is fundamentally in agreement with the authority of the industrial courts to restrict the rights of workers.

WA nurses are demanding a 10 percent wage increase and the implementation of enforced nurse-to-patient ratios. But ANF secretary Janet Reah said this week that the union intends to call off the strike if the government agrees to a pay rise of just 5 percent.

This is a definitive statement that the ANF is still ready to sell out its members, just a week after a rebellion of nurses forced the bureaucracy to walk back from its in-principle agreement with the state government's offer.

ANF chief executive officer Mark Olson said 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 merely "a measure of the frustration and anger of nurses."

His comments express the contempt of the entire union bureaucracy for its rank-and-file members. Olson, who resigned from the ANF general secretary position earlier this year, was parachuted into a new chief executive role, which he revealed last week included a salary of \$166,000.

Olson is not an anomaly—he is part of the bureaucratic apparatus of the unions. In exchange for enforcing agreements with governments and business that slash workers' jobs, wages and conditions, union leaders are richly rewarded with privileged positions and bloated salaries.

At a meeting of nurses held last week, there were calls for Olson to resign from this position. But whoever sits atop the union bureaucracy, the outcome for workers will be the same. Unless nurses take this

struggle into their own hands, the only fate being prepared for them is betrayal.

What is required is a complete break with the union bureaucracy and the establishment of independent rank-and-file committees—democratic organisations controlled by workers themselves, to discuss, develop and fight for demands based on the needs of workers.

These committees will provide the means by which nurses can escape the union stranglehold of suppression and isolation and fight to link up their action with growing numbers of workers in health and other sectors across the country and internationally who are entering into struggle.

In contrast with this perspective, the ANF has dragged out the WA nurses' dispute, ensuring that nurses' action has remained as limited as possible and putting off "indefinite strike action," which was set to commence next week.

The ANF has isolated nurses' action from that of other sections of public sector workers, including health workers and enrolled nurses covered by the United Workers Union (UWU), who face the same assault on their wages and conditions.

The UWU, which covers thousands of health workers, last month forced through a sell-out deal with the McGowan government, with the union urging its membership to "vote yes" to an agreement which included a below-inflation 3 percent wage "increase."

This follows a pattern that runs through numerous major disputes across the country this year in health and the public sector more broadly.

Having divided and isolated the struggles of health workers across the state, the New South Wales (NSW) nurses' union is attempting to divert the struggle of nurses into an election campaign for the NSW Labor Party, despite the fact that Labor's platform does not include legislated nurse-to-patient ratios, a key demand of nurses. Nor will Labor agree to the nurses' pay increase demand of 7 percent. The federal Labor government has opposed any "across-the-board" pay increases, and slashed \$2.4 billion over four years from public health spending in the recent federal budget.

The fight for decent wages, conditions and safe staffing levels in hospitals is inseparable from the fight against COVID-19. After being re-elected in a landslide in no small part because of its successful border closures in the earlier stage of the pandemic, the

McGowan government adopted the same "let it rip" policies as all the other state, territory and federal governments. Since the reopening in March, 725 people have died from COVID-19 in WA, compared with just 10 in the preceding two years of the pandemic. According to understated official figures, at least 1.2 million people have become infected in the state, bringing underfunded hospitals to their knees.

The Health Workers Rank-and-File Committee (HWRFC) and the Committee for Public Education (CFPE) have launched a campaign for unified action of health workers, educators and other workers, to fight for the elimination of COVID-19, and for real improvements to wages and conditions.

Sharply posed in this fight is the need for a political struggle against Labor and the unions and a fight to establish workers' governments to implement socialist policies. This includes placing banks and major corporations under democratic workers' control and ownership in order to free up the necessary resources to provide high-quality, free, public healthcare for all, with fair wages and conditions for nurses and other health workers.



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