

Western Australian industrial court threatens to deregister nurses' union after strike

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The Western Australian Industrial Relations Commission (IRC) threatened Tuesday to suspend the registration of the Australian Nurses Federation (ANF), in response to a 24-hour statewide strike on November 25, the first by health workers in the ANF for 24 years.

On that day, some 4,000 nurses and midwives rallied outside state parliament in Perth, the state capital, in what was reportedly the largest rally by nurses and midwives in Western Australia's (WA) history. Thousands more rallied outside regional hospitals around the state. Nurses held placards demanding a pay rise and safe staffing. At the Perth rally, they marched to the office of WA Health Minister Amber-Jade Sanderson at Dumas House, chanting "Amber-Jade give us a raise."

In accordance with the position of the WA Labor government, the IRC had not only declared the strike illegal, but had ordered the ANF to postpone voting on a regressive government pay offer and placed a gag order on nurses and the union. Labor Premier Mark McGowan denounced the striking nurses and demanded they return to work, declaring their action, "unlawful and criminal."

The attacks by the industrial court and Labor government transform nurses, once hailed and applauded as "front line heroes" and who have borne the brunt of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, into virtual enemies of the state—prevented from striking, voting and speaking.

The threat by the IRC, if consummated, would be the first time a union has been deregistered for carrying out industrial action for more than 30 years. While the form of the assault is against the union, the real target is the state's more than 15,000 public sector nurses and workers more broadly, all of whom face similar intolerable workloads and declining wage levels in the face of inflation nearing 8 percent.

The leadership of the ANF and its parent organisation, the Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation (ANMF), have downplayed the significance of this attempt to crush the struggle of nurses. A statement by the ANMF federal executive declared it merely "an unwarranted distraction from the resolution of the dispute."

The response of the union leadership was to immediately withdraw all plans for further industrial action and to cower to the courts and the Labor government. WA ANF secretary Janet Reah announced there were "no plans for further strike action at this stage."

On Thursday, after meeting with the IRC, Reah announced, "the

ANF remains a registered union," but could not give further details because the meeting was "confidential." This means nurses and midwives have no idea what concessions the union leadership has promised to impose on workers.

Nurses and midwives responded angrily on the union's Facebook page, with hundreds of comments denouncing the IRC and the Labor Party. Nurses called for further strikes and joint action with broader sections of workers, including nurses in other state branches of the ANMF.

The action by the WA IRC and the McGowan Labor government is in line with the wholesale assault on the basic rights of workers throughout the country to take industrial action to oppose attacks on their jobs, wages and conditions.

This is being spearheaded by the Albanese federal Labor government through new industrial relations legislation, passed yesterday. Cynically portrayed as intended to "get wages moving," these laws are aimed at preventing strikes and imposing the demands of big business and government on workers through backroom deals and legal proceedings. The union bureaucracies are completely on board with this evisceration of workers' rights and have been the most vocal supporters of the legislation.

This highlights the real lesson which must be drawn from these experiences. For nurses to gain their rightful wage increases and address the unrelenting driving up of workloads and destruction of working conditions, it needs to be recognised that those lined against them are a combination of the union apparatuses, the governments, whether Labor or Liberal, as well as the state, in the form of the courts and the anti-strike legislation.

A unified struggle of the working class is the essential means of combatting this anti-democratic attack and taking forward the fight for decent wages and working conditions. But this is impossible within the framework of the union bureaucracies, which are doing everything possible to isolate WA health workers.

The ANMF federal executive released a statement declaring that it "expressed the hope that the WA State Government and the WA State Union can speedily resolve the underlying bargaining dispute by negotiation." Resolve it in whose interests? The interests of nurses and workers are diametrically opposed to those of the corporations and governments that the union bureaucrats serve.

The initial outline of industrial action by the ANF over the enterprise agreement had included "indefinite strike action" in this, the seventh week of negotiations. However, no further strike action was announced at the rally. Nurses and midwives were

merely told to continue with bans on working double shifts and on accepting more patients than a ward's designated capacity.

On November 15, the ANF liquidated the industrial action entirely, without any consultation with members, after brokering an in-principle agreement with the state Labor government. This attempted sell-out by the union bureaucracy would have seen nurses and midwives receive a pay "increase" of just 3 percent per year—a substantial real wage cut amid soaring inflation. This would have further entrenched intolerable conditions, including through an inadequate nurse-to-patient ratio model that would not be implemented for another two years.

The union was only forced to retreat from this and proceed with the November 25 strike because of the widespread anger and opposition of nurses. ANF leaders were booed at union meetings and nurses sent hundreds of messages denouncing the betrayal. When finally given the chance to vote, nurses overwhelmingly rejected the union-government deal.

From the outset, the union has blocked nurses' fight for a real wage increase, with both Reah and the former ANF general secretary, now chief executive officer, Mark Olson, stating their agreement with the state Labor government that the nurses' demand for a 10 percent raise was unrealistic.

Reah made clear ahead of the November 25 strike that the union would call it off if the WA government agreed to give nurses a 5 percent pay rise, still a pay cut in real terms. McGowan refused, declaring that even this woefully inadequate claim would "cripple finances."

What McGowan meant by this is that decent wages and working conditions for health workers, as well as proper funding for public healthcare, are unacceptable, because they cut across the demands of the corporate and financial elite for ever-greater profits.

A broader struggle

The state Labor government's demand that nurses accept further pay cuts is in line with the federal Labor government's austerity agenda. The budget handed down by the Albanese government in October revealed that payments to the states and territories for public hospitals will be cut by more than \$755 million this financial year and \$2.4 billion over four years.

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In New South Wales (NSW), where nurses have held five statewide strikes this year against real wage cuts, impossible conditions and unsafe staffing levels, the NSW Nurses and Midwives' Association (the state branch of the ANMF) has falsely portrayed the state's Liberal-National government as solely responsible for the plight of health workers. The union bureaucracy has attempted to divert the anger and frustration of nurses into a campaign to elect a Labor government next March.

The fact that the sharpest attacks on health workers are now taking place in WA under a Labor government exposes this perspective as a complete dead-end for workers.

The ANF and its counterparts across the country have collaborated with both Labor and Liberal governments over decades to force through continuous cuts to public health funding and workers' pay and conditions.

This impact of this ongoing assault has been massively exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the "let it rip" policies embraced by all Australian governments, state, territory and federal, which have resulted in more than 16,000 deaths and brought hospitals to breaking point.

But at every strike rally, the union leaders, in WA and around the country, are virtually silent on the ongoing pandemic. This is because they not only agree with the profit-driven demand of governments and corporations for the abandonment of all public health measures, they have enforced it, ensuring health workers remain on the job even while exposed to or, in some cases, infected with, the highly contagious and deadly virus.

The struggle of health workers in WA is not merely a wage dispute, but a political fight. Decent wages and safe working conditions cannot be secured amid ongoing, mass COVID-19 infection and the continued gutting of public healthcare by state and federal governments alike, in collaboration with the unions.

To stop the sell-out being prepared by the ANF and to take forward the fight for decent pay and conditions, nurses and midwives must take matters into their own hands. This will require the formation of rank-and-file committees, completely independent of the union bureaucracy.

The Health Workers Rank-and-File Committee, formed as an initiative of the Socialist Equality Party, is fighting to build such committees, controlled by workers themselves, to democratically discuss, plan and fight for demands based on workers' needs, not the dictates of governments and corporations. Through rank-and-file committees, nurses, midwives and other health workers can link up with broader sections of the working class and coordinate unified action, the first task of which is to defend the nurses against the IRC-government attack.

This struggle is inseparable from the need to end the capitalist subordination of public health to private profit. This means that nurses must join the fight to establish workers' governments to implement socialist policies. This includes placing hospitals and other critical public infrastructure, along with the major corporations and banks, under democratic workers' control and ownership, to allow the reorganisation of society's resources to provide free, high-quality health care for all, with decent wages and conditions for health workers.



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