

Anger among West Australian nurses who face joint Labor-union offensive

Martin Scott

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The Australian Nursing Federation (ANF) leadership is desperately trying to defuse the anger of nurses and shut down their call for strikes, following the Western Australian Industrial Relations Commission's (WAIRC) threat last week to cancel the registration of the union.

Were this provocative action to proceed, it would be the first deregistration in Australia for more than three decades. It would ban nurses and midwives from taking any industrial action and allow the WAIRC to unilaterally impose a new enterprise agreement in line with the demands of the McGowan state Labor government.

The WAIRC moved to deregister the union after nurses defied a ban ordered by the industrial court and proceeded with a statewide strike on November 25. The actions of the IRC and the Labor government, which viciously denounced the "illegal" strike, represent an attempt to criminalise any organised opposition by workers to attacks on their pay and conditions.

The nurses struck in opposition to an offer from the Labor government of a 3 percent per annum pay "rise," a massive pay cut compared to inflation, and a nurse-to-patient ratio plan that will do nothing to resolve a major staffing and patient safety crisis in Western Australia (WA). The ANF had agreed to this sell-out deal but was forced to call the statewide strike, the first by WA nurses in more than two decades, by the determination of workers to fight.

While nurses and midwives demanded a 10 percent per annum pay rise at a stop-work meeting in October, the ANF is seeking an "increase" of just 5 percent, far short of the official 7.3 percent inflation rate.

ANF secretary Janet Reah cautioned nurses on Monday that further strikes would mean "a high probability the WAIRC would initiate steps to deregister the union." Reah made the position of the ANF leadership explicit yesterday, declaring, "We will not be defying any future orders of the WAIRC not to strike."

In other words, the union bureaucracy has handed the right to decide whether nurses and midwives take any action against wage cuts and unsafe conditions over to the industrial courts and the Labor government that is demanding the cuts and which bears chief responsibility for the crisis in the state's health system.

The real intended audience for this message is not health workers, but Premier Mark McGowan and his government. It amounts to a promise by the ANF leadership to get this dispute under control, shut down workers' opposition and enforce the real wage cuts demanded by Labor.

Health workers have responded angrily on social media to the sell-out being prepared by the union bureaucracy. In response to Reah's declaration that industrial action would be abandoned and replaced with a pathetic campaign of publicity stunts, Kait Mac wrote: "This is not the fight I want to pay my fees towards.... I want a union who will not buckle under pressure."

Beth Fletcher made an astute assessment of what was behind Reah's posts: "So basically you are urging us to take the offer now." Kayla Marie wrote: "It's an awful offer and a real slap in the face to nurses. We need to fight for an increase."

Over the past week, Reah has sought to placate furious workers by promoting the supposedly superior penalty rates paid to nurses and midwives in WA compared to other Australian states. This is a scare tactic, intended to shut down calls by workers for any action that might provoke further intervention from the WAIRC, leading to arbitration and the possible erasure of these conditions.

This information has been disseminated in piecemeal fashion in an attempt to prevent workers from making an overall calculation, and is in any case a distraction from the central issue—according to the ANF's own figures, nurses in WA receive the second-lowest base pay in the country.

Kim Bolton wrote: "Why are you sending this? Stop making excuses and start action again!" Lj Anderson warned, "the ANF is buttering us up for what they will trade off for the 5% and sell it to us as the government and the WAIRC taking it from us."

Ailish Lee wrote: "The union shouted alongside us—but now they too are quiet, and it looks like their advocacy for us nurses has gone away... We are being encouraged to consider how 'good we have it'! I feel let down and walked over."

David Fiona Kent wrote: "Covid isn't going away, McGowan isn't going away and NOR ARE WE!!! I say we fight til we get what we deserve!! I really don't care what happens with the union! The union has done us no favours."

Rita N James Quin emphasised that workers must not abandon the struggle, despite the betrayal by the ANF bureaucracy: “We just have to vote No to any BS offer that comes our way regardless of how the union might sugar coat it. We still have a voice and are united. We just don’t have the union support we thought we had.”

These comments reflect a growing anger and hostility to the ANF bureaucracy among the health workers, who expressed their determination to fight with calls for strikes, sickouts and mass resignations.

The vast gulf between these sentiments and the attempts by the ANF to suppress any action demonstrate that unless workers take matters into their own hands, they will be sold out.

Anger and determination alone are not enough to defeat a tripartite assault by the Labor government, WAIRC and the ANF bureaucracy on nurses’ pay, conditions and basic rights. WA nurses need to build new organisations of struggle, rank-and-file committees, through which to democratically develop demands based on the needs of workers, not what the government or union says is “realistic,” and prepare a plan of action to fight for them.

This will require a political fight against the straitjacket of the industrial courts and the anti-strike laws they enforce. This means a frontal attack on the unions and Labor, which have collaborated over decades to impose upon the Australian working class the most draconian industrial relations legislation of any advanced capitalist country.

The “Secure Jobs, Better Pay” bill, passed by the federal Labor government last week with the eager support of the unions, will even more tightly constrict the ability of workers to take industrial action in opposition to attacks on their pay and conditions. The purpose of this is to shut down opposition to the Albanese government’s broader agenda of slashing wages and social spending, including on public health.

Workers on social media also raised the necessity to broaden the struggle. Kathryn Stark wrote, “the ANF needs to step up and get the support of other unions as well as the federal branch.”

But the union bureaucracy is doing the opposite. By promoting comparisons of penalty rates in WA with those in other states, Reah is deliberately seeking to drive a wedge between workers across the country.

A similar method has been employed by the union leadership in New South Wales (NSW) throughout a dispute that has seen nurses carry out five statewide strikes this year. The state Nurses and Midwives’ Association (NSWNMA) has highlighted supposedly favourable conditions in other (Labor-led) states in order to divert the struggle of health workers into a campaign to elect a state Labor government in March 2023.

The vicious attack on the basic industrial rights of nurses in WA, with Labor at the helm, exposes as utterly fraudulent the NSWNMA’s claim that the Liberal-Nationals bear sole

responsibility for the dire conditions confronting health workers in NSW.

The Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation’s (ANMF) federal Facebook page, along with those of its branches in other states, are completely silent about the provocation against nurses in WA. This is a deliberate strategy adopted by the ANMF and its branches to suppress a unified struggle by nurses across the country.

The reality is that, in every state, health workers confront a deepening assault on pay and conditions that have already been going backwards for years, under the careful supervision of the union bureaucracy.

Around the country, decades of cuts to health funding by all state, territory and federal governments, Labor and Liberal-National alike, have not only left health workers with barely liveable wages, but have placed the hospital system in a state of constant crisis. This has been massively exacerbated by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, itself the result of the bipartisan and union-backed adoption of “let it rip” policies.

The WA Labor government played a critical role in the reopening agenda. Broad public support for public health measures against COVID-19 compelled the government to maintain the state’s “hard border” until March this year. It was only after McGowan’s capitulation that the Australian ruling elite was able to declare that there could be no further disruption to the profits of big business in the interest of public health.

As a result of crippling staff shortages and an influx of COVID-19 patients, hospitals across Australia have repeatedly been forced to turn sick people away, while patients are treated in corridors and sleep on floors.

The fact that, under these conditions, governments are implementing further cuts to health funding, is an unanswerable indictment of capitalism, under which the health and lives of ordinary people are completely subordinated to the profit demands of big business.

The struggle for decent pay and conditions for nurses and midwives, and a high-quality public health system, freely available to all, is thus inseparable from the fight for an alternative socialist perspective based on meeting the needs of working people and society.



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