

Oppose massive fines against Western Australian nurses!

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The Socialist Equality Party calls on workers to oppose the assault on the basic rights of nurses and midwives that is currently underway in Western Australia (WA). The state Industrial Relations Commission (IRC) is seeking to levy massive fines against the Australian Nursing Federation (ANF) over an “illegal” one-day strike by public sector health workers in November last year.

On Wednesday, the union and the WA Labor government registrar announced they had agreed to a penalty of \$350,000—itself an outrageous sum—but the full bench of the IRC has not yet issued a final ruling and could still impose the maximum penalty of almost \$36 million.

This fine—for a single strike of less than 24 hours—would be the largest against an Australian union by a factor of more than 40, and thousands of times higher than penalties for comparable strikes. The incredible sum is based on the IRC seeking the maximum \$10,000 penalty for each alleged “breach,” that is for every individual worker who took part in the strike.

The strike, involving 4,000 workers, was a completely legitimate exercise of workers’ fundamental democratic rights. It was waged in opposition to the Labor government’s 3 percent nominal wage rise offer, which is in reality a major real pay cut.

The IRC not only declared the stoppage illegal, but sought to prevent workers from voting on the pay offer, and imposed a gag order to stop them speaking to the press, in measures reminiscent of a police state.

Whatever the final figure of the fine, Labor and the industrial court have set a benchmark for what can be imposed across the country.

The ANF is the immediate target, but the real aim of the IRC and the Labor government is to send a clear message to nurses, midwives and the entire working class: No opposition to the slashing of real wages, working conditions and social services will be tolerated.

This is necessary because, under conditions of the worst cost-of-living crisis for decades and increasingly untenable conditions for workers, Labor is conscious that it is sitting

atop a powder keg. The union bureaucracy is equally aware of this explosive situation, and is determined to shut down any eruption of anger in the working class.

This is not solely a question of the WA Labor administration. In green-lighting such a drastic attack, it almost certainly consulted with the federal Labor government of Prime Minister Anthony Albanese. At the national level, Labor is preparing sweeping budget austerity measures. It has done nothing to ease the cost-of-living catastrophe facing workers, pressing ahead instead with tax cuts for the ultra wealthy and other pro-business policies. Such measures are incompatible with basic democratic rights.

The provocative act in WA has been met with complete silence from the unions. The ANF is the state branch of the Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation (ANMF), the largest union in the country. But neither the federal leadership and the other state sections of the ANMF, nor any other union have said a word about the WA Labor government’s unprecedented attack on workers’ rights.

This conspiracy of silence has particular significance in New South Wales (NSW). After multiple mass strikes by health workers last year, the NSW Nurses and Midwives Association (the state branch of the ANMF), shut down workers’ demands for further action and diverted the struggle into a campaign to elect a Labor government. The vicious attack against nurses in WA exposes the lies promoted by the bureaucracy that the demands of NSW nurses for decent pay and safe staffing will be resolved by a Labor government.

With Labor now holding office federally and in every state and territory except Tasmania, this is the reality behind their phony election promises of “a better future” and “a fresh start.”

Workers in every industry across the country need to draw definite conclusions. If Labor and the industrial courts are ready to launch an assault of this magnitude against nurses, the “frontline heroes” of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, then what are they preparing to throw at the rest of the

working class?

That this historic attack on the right to strike has been launched by Labor governments, state and federal, in conjunction with the industrial relations courts, means that the fight for a living wage, tolerable workloads and safe working conditions pits workers directly against the capitalist state. It is the anti-strike laws of this capitalist state that the union leadership uses as a sword of Damocles above the heads of the working class.

These measures are by no means an Australian phenomenon. Workers in France, the UK, the US, Sri Lanka and globally are confronted with the full force of the state as they fight for the same conditions and wage rises as nurses here.

A counteroffensive must be built. To fight for real wage increases, decent, safe, working conditions, and basic industrial rights, workers need to mount a unified struggle against Labor and the industrial courts. This is impossible within the straight-jacket of the union apparatus, as is made clear by their coverup of, and collaboration with, the WA assault.

Instead, workers need to build new organisations of struggle, democratically controlled by workers themselves and completely independent of the union bureaucracy. These rank-and-file committees are the only means through which workers can fight, not only for their own demands but, by linking up with workers in other sections of industry, here and internationally, for the interests of the working class as a whole.

The potential fines and the union's response to them starkly illustrate the need for workers to take matters into their own hands. But this is also demonstrated by the entire course of the dispute.

Throughout, the union has isolated workers, while in practice acceding to each new edict of the government and the IRC.

The union sought to ram through the government's real wage cut and was compelled to change tack, only because of explosive opposition from workers. But the union leadership has demonstrated, time and time again, that it will do everything it can to block a genuine struggle.

In accepting the "right" of the IRC to levy massive fines, the union is helping to establish a precedent for sweeping attacks on all future struggles. And it is signaling its willingness to impose a sell-out on nurses.

To take forward the struggle that must be waged, it is necessary for nurses to develop an assessment of what this attack signifies.

The WA Labor government, led by Premier Mark McGowan, spearheaded this assault on behalf of the entire

ruling class. Ahead of the November strike, the government took out full-page advertisements in the WA newspapers denouncing the striking health workers.

This is completely in line with the agenda of the federal Labor government to slash wages and social spending to boost corporate profits and fund its escalating military budget in preparation for a US-led war with China.

These were the aims behind Labor's industrial relations reforms, introduced late last year, with the full support of the unions. The legislation granted the Fair Work Commission—the federal counterpart of the IRC—far greater powers to intervene in disputes, shut down strikes, and impose the wage cuts demanded by big business.

This is the continuation of harsh attacks on the working class by successive Labor governments, which, since the 1980s, have played the key role, together with the unions, in erecting a draconian industrial relations apparatus.

These anti-democratic, anti-worker laws must be defeated and repealed, including through protests, strikes and other actions. The basis for such a fight exists—for example, tens of thousands of construction workers marched across the country last week in opposition to anti-strike laws. But the bureaucrats who fronted these demonstrations had nothing to offer workers except phony militant rhetoric and toothless appeals for reform from the same Labor governments responsible for the harshest attacks.

This is only possible through the fight to build a network of rank-and-file committees, linking workers in every sector of industry.

Ultimately, the fight for decent wages and conditions for health workers is inseparable from a struggle against the capitalist system, under which every aspect of humanity, even health and life itself, is subordinated to profit.



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