

Australia: Police called to shut down SEP campaign as Victorian nurses reject union-government wage cut

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Victorian public sector nurses and midwives yesterday rejected a union-government deal that would have imposed further cuts to real wages over the next four years.

This result is a significant blow to the Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation (ANMF) bureaucracy, which is working hand-in-hand with the state Labor government to inflict its austerity agenda on 60,000 nurses and midwives—the largest cohort of the public sector.

The offer was voted down in a meeting of around 3,000 health workers, despite a concerted attempt by the union leadership to suppress criticism—or even discussion—of the proposed enterprise agreement and fraudulently portray it as a win.

Before the meeting, ANMF representatives attempted to prevent Socialist Equality Party (SEP) supporters from distributing leaflets warning that the union leadership was preparing to sell workers out.

Private security guards from the venue attempted to physically intimidate and block SEP campaigners from handing material to workers, saying, “The client doesn’t want you here.” When they objected, on the basis that they were on a public footpath, the police were called, with more than a dozen officers arriving to intervene on behalf of the ANMF bureaucracy.

The union officials declared that the SEP could not hand out its leaflet because the material “was non-affiliated to the ANMF.” The SEP pleads guilty. The SEP article, previously posted on the WSWs, warned nurses that the union leaders were organising a betrayal, which was proven in the course of the meeting.

The ANMF leadership resorted quickly to these blatantly anti-democratic means because they were acutely aware of workers’ opposition to further attacks on their already dire wages and conditions, enforced through years of union-government deals.

The union bureaucrats knew that the offer they were about to unveil would be unacceptable to a significant layer of workers, and were seeking to shut down any criticism in the hope that they would be able to impose the deal through a process of obfuscation and secrecy.

Without any input from workers, the ANMF bureaucracy used Friday’s announcement of an “in-principle agreement” as a pretext to shut down “Stage 2” industrial action, including bed closures, just hours after it began.

Although the union-government deal was announced Friday, the

ANMF leadership refused to provide members with even the barest detail of what it contained until the meeting yesterday. This was a deliberate attempt to prevent discussion of the offer before the bureaucrats could paint it in the most favourable light and then quickly proceed to a vote.

Even within the meeting, workers told the *World Socialist Web Site* the offer was presented in a manner that was designed to confuse and cover over the reality—that the ANMF bureaucracy and the state Labor government had cooked up yet another deal that would leave nurses and midwives worse off.

In a presentation involving more than 40 powerpoint slides, union officials sought to bury the real wage cuts under a dizzying list of highly specific allowances, one-off payments and other measures. This information was not provided on paper or in digital form to workers before, during or after the meeting, preventing any close examination.

Even now, nurses and midwives have been given only the sketchiest impression of what the offer contained. An email sent to ANMF members last night claimed “a minimum wage and cash uplift of six per cent” in the first year, and “government wages policy [3 percent] and a further cash payment in the second year, plus wages policy in the third and fourth year.”

Even this meagre set of figures is drenched in obfuscation. According to workers’ comments online, the initial “wage and cash uplift” consists of a 3 percent nominal pay increase and a one-off payment of up to \$6,000—pro-rated for non-full-time workers. The second-year cash payment is reportedly \$1,000.

In other words, the ANMF presented this offer as a win justifying the immediate suspension of industrial action. It was virtually identical to the deal that nurses and midwives unanimously rejected on March 21.

The use of one-off payments as a “sweetener” to impose sub-inflationary wage “rises” ensures that nurses and midwives will continue to fall further behind in real terms. Moreover, the payments are not enough to make up for current inflation, let alone losses sustained in past years under previous union-Labor agreements.

In an attempt to conceal this, the ANMF claims that public sector nurses and midwives will also benefit from the aged care work value case currently before the Fair Work Commission (FWC). However, the Labor government has not committed to this in

writing, and it is unclear what the amount would be.

Inclusive of all these nebulous components, the deal would amount to “wage increases between 18 and 23 per cent” over four years—barely higher than the official inflation rate of 3.6 percent and far short of the real rise in the cost of living. The cost of rent, for example, has increased by an average of 7.8 percent across the country in the past year.

However, the email clearly stated that despite the rejection of the offer, there was no current plan to resume Stage 2 industrial action.

Despite the deliberate confusion sown in the meeting, nurses and midwives gradually came to the realisation that what was being presented was nothing more than a sell-out. The opposition to the deal, and to the bureaucracy itself, was reflected in a long line of workers speaking against the offer. Many nurses and midwives did not get the opportunity to speak.

One worker described to the WWSWS a palpable shift in the atmosphere during the course of the meeting.

Initially, ANMF Victorian branch secretary Lisa Fitzpatrick and other officials were welcomed with cheers and applause. This reflected the illusions held by some workers as a result of their previous posturing as leaders of a militant struggle, including through the promotion of a “yes” vote on industrial action late last month.

But as workers spoke against the deal, denouncing it as “smoke and mirrors,” and declaring “the base rate is too low,” the crowd became more emboldened, prompting Paul Gilbert, ANMF Victoria assistant secretary, to plaintively demand “respect.”

Following the meeting, Fitzpatrick was described by the *Age* newspaper as “clearly rattled” by nurses and midwives’ rejection of the union-government deal. She disparagingly said the “no” vote was because “our members haven’t been able to grasp the concept of the aged care wages case.”

In other words, Fitzpatrick was saying nurses and midwives are too stupid to know what’s good for them.

This is a clear statement of the attitude of the ANMF bureaucracy to the nurses and midwives it claims to represent. In a further demonstration of this, during the meeting, Gilbert tried to persuade workers to accept the deal by claiming that rejecting it would render future industrial action “unprotected,” that is, illegal.

While it is true that Australia’s draconian anti-strike laws give the pro-business FWC the power to shut down industrial action, it is not required to do so simply because workers have rejected a proposed enterprise agreement.

Implicit in Gilbert’s threat is the fact that the ANMF, confronted with opposition from members, will collaborate fully with the Labor government and the industrial courts to suppress the struggle of workers.

This is completely in line with the bureaucracy’s explicit attack on members’ democratic rights yesterday, when security guards and police were deployed against SEP campaigners outside the meeting.

The ANMF could not tolerate the intervention of the SEP, which puts forward a program and perspective for nurses and midwives to oppose the bureaucracy’s attempts to sell them out, and instead fight for their own interests, not those of the Labor government.

This should serve as a stark warning for nurses and midwives.

The ANMF leadership is prepared to work with every mechanism of the state to shut down dissent.

The ANMF bureaucracy is hostile to any criticism, whether from members or the SEP, because it is conscious that there is mounting opposition among health workers to what it is seeking to impose—the punitive sub-inflationary wage policy of the state Labor government.

Around the country and at the federal level, Labor governments—aided and abetted at every turn by the unions—are at the forefront of the assault on working-class wages and conditions. In the 12 months to March, the average nominal wage increase for public sector workers was just 2.9 percent, compared with the already meagre 4.4 percent in the private sector.

The rejection of this union-Labor offensive by Victorian nurses and midwives is an important development. But it is only a first step.

What is required is precisely what the ANMF leadership was determined to prevent the SEP from discussing with nurses and midwives yesterday—a rebellion of workers against the ANMF bureaucracy and the building of independent organs through which workers can fight.

This means the establishment of rank-and-file committees, through which workers can democratically prepare and put into action a fight for demands based on the actual needs of workers.

To fight for these demands, nurses and midwives will need to turn to broader layers of workers throughout the public sector and beyond, where workers confront similar attacks.

This includes nurses and midwives in New South Wales, where the union bureaucracy recently employed anti-democratic means to shut down a motion by workers demanding a fight for a 30 percent pay increase.

To take forward the fight for real improvements to wages and conditions, nurses and midwives will need to wage a political and industrial struggle against the pro-business Labor government.

This is inseparable from the fight for a high quality hospital system, which is incompatible with the capitalist subordination of human need to private profit.

The banks and major corporations must be placed under public ownership and democratic workers’ control to free up the resources required for a public health system of the highest quality. That requires a fight for socialism against capitalism and all the forces that defend it.

Contact the Health Workers Rank-and-File Committee:

Email: sephw.aus@gmail.com

Twitter: @HealthRandF_Aus

Facebook: facebook.com/groups/hwrfcaus



To contact the WWSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact