

Victorian nurses: Reject rejigged union-government sellout! Form rank-and-file committees to fight for pay and conditions!

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The Victorian branch of the Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation (ANMF) will hold a statewide members' meeting on Wednesday, seeking the endorsement of a new enterprise agreement struck with the state Labor government.

ANMF Victorian Secretary Lisa Fitzpatrick said on Saturday this was an “offer that respects the work [nurses and midwives] do, rewards the work they have done through the pandemic and delivers on a significant majority of our members' claims.”

In fact, while few details of the proposed union-government wage deal have been released, all indications are that this offer is little better than the one that was overwhelmingly voted down by nurses and midwives last month.

The ANMF bureaucracy claims the new offer will deliver a 28.4 percent pay rise over four years, but the largest component of this relies on the as-yet unknown outcome of the Fair Work Commission work value case. As well, the “new” offer rolls two one-off payments included in the previous proposal into the overall pay rise figure.

While the full extent of the mathematical chicanery employed by the ANMF bureaucracy to arrive at this figure will not be clear until Wednesday's meeting, already it drips with obfuscation. The unusual use of a “compounded” figure is a deliberate ploy to make the pay rise look bigger than it is.

If these substantial question marks are put aside, and the deal is taken at face value, it would amount to nominal pay rises of around 6.45 percent per annum. While official annual inflation is at 3.6 percent, the cost of the essentials that make up the bulk of spending for low- and middle-income earners is rising far more quickly. Average advertised rent prices, for example, have risen 9.2 percent over the past year, and around 45 percent since 2020.

Victorian public sector nurses and midwives, meanwhile, have not received a pay rise since a 3 percent increase in

December 2022, less than half the official inflation rate of 7.8 percent.

Over the course of the last four-year enterprise agreement imposed by the ANMF, weekly pay for a first-year registered nurse (RN) has increased from \$1,188.40 to just \$1,298.60. Had this risen in line with the consumer price index (CPI), first-year RNs would now earn \$1,392.70. In other words, they are almost \$100 per week worse off in real terms.

The Health Workers Rank-and-File Committee urges nurses and midwives to reject the “new” union-government sellout deal, which will see workers fall further behind the real rise in the cost of living.

The principled stand taken by workers at the May meeting, in opposition to the ANMF bureaucracy, was important, but it is only a first step.

Nurses and midwives be warned! Lisa Fitzpatrick and her cronies may have been caught by surprise by the “no” vote last month, but now they are prepared. They will be determined to prevent a repeat of the May meeting, where speeches by critical workers, opposing the deal and expressing the real conditions confronted by nurses and midwives, found resonance and completely changed the atmosphere in Festival Hall.

This means there is every likelihood that the ANMF leadership will seek to limit contributions from rank-and-file workers at Wednesday's meeting as much as possible, and to overwhelm them with speeches promoting the deal. Nurses and midwives attending the meeting must oppose any attempt to curtail discussion and rush to a vote, and insist that all voices be heard.

Whatever the outcome on Wednesday, the burning issue for nurses and midwives is that the struggle for real improvements to wages and conditions cannot be taken forward within the framework of the ANMF bureaucracy, which remains committed to enforcing the Labor government's punitive wage policy and broader agenda of

cuts to health and other social spending.

This means nurses and midwives need to build fighting organisations of their own, rank-and-file committees that are independent of the union leaders. Through these committees, workers can fight for demands based on their actual needs, not what the government says is “affordable.”

In the first instance, these committees should insist that the ANMF reinstates “Stage 2” industrial action measures, including bed closures, which were aborted after just a few hours last month when the first union-government deal was announced. Nurses and midwives cannot fight with one hand tied behind their back.

The struggle for a real pay rise, that not only covers present and future increases in the cost of living, but makes up for losses incurred under previous union-government sellout deals, must be connected with a political fight against the Labor government and its austerity agenda.

The ANMF bureaucracy is diametrically opposed and intensely hostile to this, as was demonstrated by its use of security guards and police to prevent Health Workers Rank-and-File Committee supporters from distributing leaflets and speaking to workers outside Festival Hall.

Since then, the union leadership has carried out an operation designed to undermine and reverse the oppositional sentiment expressed at the last mass meeting.

While refusing to reinstate “Stage 2” industrial action, the ANMF held hospital-level meetings across the state, attempting to convince workers that their opposition to the deal was misplaced.

The union leadership still maintains that the May “no” vote was all a big misunderstanding. Supposedly, workers whose training, intelligence and attention to detail is a matter of life and death for their patients every day were simply unable to comprehend that the previous offer was a great deal.

Under this pretext, the ANMF is promoting the apparent simplicity of the new proposal—“a 28.4 percent (compounded) wage increase by the end of the fourth year.” This is a deliberate attempt to discourage nurses and midwives from subjecting the offer to close scrutiny.

These meetings were followed by a series of diversionary stunts, including calling on nurses and midwives to phone and email the state premier and treasurer, pleading for a better offer. The aim of these was both to promote illusions that workers’ demands can be achieved through polite appeals to the government, and to cover over the real relationship of the ANMF bureaucracy to Labor.

Following the emphatic “no” vote, the ANMF bureaucracy has worked closely with the Labor government to repackage the deepening attack on wages in a way they believe workers can be hoodwinked into accepting.

In fact, the woeful enterprise agreement offer is part of a broader attack on health and other social spending by the Labor government.

Twenty small health services in rural and regional Victoria were recently told their budgets would be slashed by up to 30 percent, on top of previous cuts earlier in the year. The Labor government is preparing to reduce the number of health services from 76 to 12, in a major cost-cutting operation that will destroy jobs and exacerbate the already dire conditions in hospitals across the state.

The ANMF and other health unions are working in close collaboration with the Labor government to impose these cuts, just as they have done for decades, and just as they are now seeking to impose a rotten deal for nurses and midwives across the state.

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.

It is to these layers of public-sector workers across the country, including tens of thousands of health workers, that Victorian nurses and midwives must turn.

Through a network of rank-and-file committees, these workers can discuss the commonality of their situation—an assault on their jobs, wages and conditions—and prepare a unified fightback against its perpetrators, the Labor governments and the complicit union bureaucracies.

The struggle for decent conditions for nurses and midwives 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.



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