

South Australian nurses reject union-Labor sellout

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Nurses and midwives in South Australia (SA) have decisively voted down a real-wage cutting enterprise agreement offer from the state Labor government, defying an aggressive “yes” campaign by the Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation (ANMF) bureaucracy. More than two-thirds of the almost 13,000 health workers who took part in the ballot recorded a “no” vote.

The vote shows in black and white that South Australian nurses and midwives are not only up against a Labor government that wants to slash their pay and conditions, but a union bureaucracy that is complicit in the attack.

The rejected union-Labor agreement offered a 16 percent cumulative nominal pay rise, effectively over four years, as the final stage of the wage increase would not begin until July 2028. This was endorsed by the ANMF leadership despite the fact that it did not come close to the demand advanced by the union earlier in this dispute for a 23 percent pay rise over just three years.

The deal would have fallen far short of keeping up with the soaring cost of living, let alone restoring losses imposed in previous union-government agreements.

In 2020, the ANMF locked in three years’ of 2 percent per annum pay rises, while inflation reached a peak of over 8 percent. In 2023, after nurses and midwives had already been slugged with these significant real wage cuts, the union pushed through sub-inflationary 3 percent per annum pay increases for the next three years.

The result is that, since 2022, while nurses’ pay has increased by just 9.27 percent, average advertised house rents in Adelaide have risen by 88.5 percent and unit rents by 45.3 percent.

Moreover, the agreement would have done nothing to resolve the dire working conditions confronted by nurses and midwives. A key safe-staffing demand—that all babies in postnatal wards be counted as patients for the purposes of nurse-to-patient ratios—was thrown out, with the government offering instead a vague promise to “review”

the issue. Broader safe-staffing claims, reclassification demands, proposals for expanded leave entitlements and increased night-shift penalties were also unaddressed in the union-Labor agreement.

The proposal also contained nothing to reverse the growing delays faced by patients in SA hospitals, the product of worsening staff and resource shortages. In 2024–25, just 53 percent of patients presenting to the state’s emergency departments were seen within the recommended time for their triage category, well below the national average of 67 percent, and 10 percent spent more than 12 hours in emergency.

In the face of the powerful vote of opposition to this rotten deal, the ANMF leadership has refused to call further industrial action, in line with the Labor government’s intention that the dispute be resolved through arbitration before the South Australian Employment Tribunal (SAET).

Make no mistake. Nurses and midwives cannot place their fate in the hands of the SAET, which is not an “independent umpire” as the Labor government claims, but an industrial court that serves the interests of big business and the state.

There is an alternative way forward, but not within the stranglehold of the ANMF bureaucracy, which was preparing a sellout long before nurses and midwives began to vote. The ballot followed months of postponed, cancelled and heavily restricted industrial action, including a protracted pause before and after the state election. The union bureaucracy held just two 24-hour strikes, isolated to individual hospitals, at Lyell McEwin Hospital on June 4 and Flinders Medical Centre on June 18.

The limited character of the industrial campaign was not the result of mistaken or timid leadership of the union. It was a calculated ploy to demoralise workers and soften them up to begrudgingly accept a sellout. Adding to this

pressure, the ANMF bureaucracy insisted throughout that, whether nurses voted “yes” or “no,” their part in the struggle was over, and the only choice they could make was between the rotten offer on the table and arbitration, which will inevitably be a protracted process that concludes with further real wage cuts.

The strong “no” vote shows that South Australian nurses and midwives are not willing to accept this framework, and are starting to draw their own conclusions about the union leadership. The ANMF’s social media posts announcing the ballot result were met with hundreds of comments from nurses and midwives, expressing their sense of betrayal, over both the bureaucracy’s promotion of the “yes” vote and its insistence that the government’s arbitration move cannot be challenged.

Numerous workers called for ANMF SA Secretary Elizabeth Dabars to resign: “I think we need to move to a vote of no confidence in her,” one wrote. “I look forward to your resignation Liz,” posted another.

These are healthy sentiments. For the nurses and midwives, Dabars is the human embodiment of the organisation that has betrayed them. But removing Dabars from the leadership and replacing her with another bureaucrat will not change the function of the ANMF, which is not a product of individual failings or malign intent, but of the role played by all the unions, as an industrial police force of big business and government.

The unions are not just allies of state and federal Labor governments, but integral components of them, jointly imposing the slashing of public sector jobs, wages and conditions, and the broader austerity agenda, including the evisceration of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), which will destroy the lives of hundreds of thousands of people with disabilities, their families and carers.

South Australian nurses and midwives are up against powerful forces. But they are not alone.

Less than a week before the nurses’ ballot closed, more than 30,000 public school teachers and education support staff in neighbouring Victoria took their second 24-hour strike, after fighting off a last-ditch attempt by the Australian Education Union (AEU) to ram through a sellout deal on behalf of the state Labor government. The AEU bureaucracy has now been forced to call a third strike, but it is more than two weeks away, allowing ample time for another union-government sellout attempt.

These are significant developments, not just for nurses and teachers, who have rejected union-endorsed agreements for the first time in decades, but for the

broader working class. The inability of the unions and Labor to bring these key industrial disputes to a speedy halt, as they have done so many times before, is a real cause for concern in the ruling class. The teachers’ dispute in particular played a major part last week in the ouster of Victorian Premier Jacinta Allan and the sudden resignation of Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) leaders Sally McManus and Michele O’Neil.

Like the teachers, South Australian nurses and midwives have, by voting “no,” taken an important first step in the fight that must be taken up against the state Labor government and the ANMF bureaucracy.

To take this forward, however, new organisations of struggle are required. Rank-and-file committees, democratically led by nurses and midwives themselves, not highly paid bureaucrats, must be built in every hospital and health facility.

Through these committees, nurses and midwives can share information, discuss and formulate demands based on what they and the public health system need, and develop an industrial and political strategy through which to fight for them. Such committees can fight to unify their struggles with other sections of workers that confront a similar assault on their jobs, wages and conditions, including the Victorian teachers, as well as other workers throughout the public sector.

The struggle for decent wages and safe staffing for health workers is inseparable from the fight for a fully funded public health system of the highest quality, freely accessible to all. This is incompatible with the capitalist system itself, under which all human needs are subordinated to the profit demands of the financial and corporate elite. The alternative is the fight for socialism.

The Health Workers Rank-and-File Committee urges nurses, midwives and all other healthcare professionals to contact us today to discuss how to establish a rank-and-file committee at your workplace.

Contact the Health Workers’ Rank-and-File Committee (HWRFC):

Email: sephw.aus@gmail.com

Twitter: [@HealthRandF_Aus](https://twitter.com/HealthRandF_Aus)

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