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Western Australian nurses' union prepares to ram through Labor government wage cut

In an act welcomed by the Australian Nursing Federation, the Western Australian Labor government has moved to impose on public sector nurses and midwives a below-inflation wages and conditions agreement that they previously rejected.

Last Wednesday, the government declared that “while negotiations continue” with the union, it would “fast-track the cost of living payment and pay rise to recognise the valuable work of our public sector nurses [and] midwives.”



Mass meeting of WA nurses in October [Photo: Australian Nursing Federation - WA]

This so-called cost of living payment, which is subject to taxation, is capped at \$3,000 for full-time workers, with part-time and casual nurses to receive less on a pro-rata basis. The pay rise of 3 percent a year is in reality a significant real wage cut, with official inflation in

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Western Australia at 7.3 percent and the actual rise in costs of living for workers even higher.

The Labor government of Premier Mark McGowan is attempting to establish “facts on the ground,” ramming through its regressive public sector workers’ wage cap policy ahead of a potential Industrial Relations Commission (IRC) ruling enforcing the industrial contract. The Australian Nursing Federation (ANF) bureaucracy nevertheless welcomed the government’s initiative.

State secretary Janet Reah described it as a “sensible step” and falsely added that the 3 percent wage adjustment would help “retain nurses and midwives in Western Australia and attract them from other states and territories.”

The union official also emphasised her confidence in the government’s limited gestures toward the introduction of nurse-to-patient staffing ratios. These will supposedly be phased in over the next two years, however it remains to be seen whether they will be effectively implemented. Loopholes have already been identified—for example, hospitalised babies will not count as patients as far as ratios are concerned. Moreover, the question of ratios becomes moot under conditions of chronic staffing shortages, which are worsening as experienced and burned-out nurses quit the profession.

In a note to ANF members, Reah said she hoped to continue negotiations on increasing the nominal wage rise to 5 percent a year—also below inflation—but emphasised that the government’s measures were first proposed by union officials in November. She explained that the union had told the government that “if they paid the cost of living payment and the first pay increase we would continue to negotiate but refrain from industrial action.” It was only because this was rejected by nurses that a one-day strike and protest rally was organised, in defiance of an IRC ban.

Reah’s statements represent a tacit acceptance of the IRC’s anti-democratic rulings and the McGowan government’s rotten offer.

The day before the ANF secretary welcomed the government’s imposition of the 3 percent wages policy, she appeared before the full bench of the IRC. The industrial court is preparing to issue two separate fines of up to \$40,000 each against Reah and the union, while it also considers whether to deregister the union, that is, effectively ban it. Hearings on these issues are set to commence on February 20.

The deregistration threat represents an appalling attack on the democratic rights of the 18,000 public sector nurses and midwives in WA. If it proceeds, it would be the first time such a measure was undertaken in Australia in more than three decades. This would

prevent nurses from legally taking industrial action and potentially result in the IRC unilaterally imposing an enterprise agreement in accordance with the demands of the Labor government.

That the ANF felt compelled to proceed with the proscribed action reflected the enormous frustration and anger of workers in the health system. After nearly three years of highly stressful pandemic conditions, on top of long-standing systematic underfunding, nurses who were previously hailed as “heroes” were told to swallow a substantial real wage cut. Now they are threatened with outright state repression.

That this is proceeding under a state Labor government points to what is being prepared against the working class by the federal Labor government of Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, which, like its state counterparts, represents the interests of big business and finance capital.

The McGowan government could easily meet the demands of the nurses and fund a high-quality public hospital system if it wished to do so. With the opposition Liberal Party nearly wiped out at the last state election, Labor controls 53 of the 59 lower house seats and 22 of the 36 upper house seats. Mineral-rich Western Australia has by far the largest budget surplus in the country due to record-high iron ore prices fuelling mining tax intakes. Its budget last May revealed a \$5.7 billion surplus.

The state Labor government’s priority is satisfying the demands of the corporations, international credit rating agencies and the ultra-wealthy.

Updating the state’s finances on December 15, McGowan declared that nothing could be added to the “generous” offer put to public sector workers because: “By staying in surplus we have capacity to respond to what might occur next year and years after, in terms of impacts of what’s happening around the world. What COVID showed is that you need to have some financial capacity to respond to whatever the world throws at you.”

Put more bluntly, as the world economic crisis deepens, Labor wants to be ready to funnel billions of dollars more in public subsidies to big-business interests.

The assault on nurses in WA exposes as a fraud the claims of the Nurses and Midwives’ Association bureaucracy that New South Wales (NSW) nurses’ ongoing dispute over wages, staffing and patient safety will be resolved through the election of a Labor government at the state election next March. While the NSW Liberal-National government has responded to four statewide strikes by nurses and midwives with denunciations and fines, McGowan’s attacks over a single strike have been sharper.

In both states, the trade unions have sought to isolate and demobilise the nurses and midwives in the face of government-IRC threats. The ANF has called off all industrial action. Earlier this month, Reah emphasised, “We will not be defying any future orders of the WA IRC not to strike.”

Speaking after the December 20 IRC hearing, Reah added: “My priorities are to ensure the ANF is not deregistered and to minimise any potential fines or other consequences to the union.”

This is a frank admission that the union bureaucracy’s “priorities” are not the wages and conditions of nurses, nor addressing the crisis of the public hospital system.

No trade union has done anything whatsoever over the IRC deregistration threat. On December 16, the Community & Public Sector Union / Civil Service Association of WA, covering public servants, announced that it had accepted an industrial agreement virtually identical to that offered to the nurses, involving a nominal 3 percent wage rise and \$3,000 sign-on bonus.

This followed moves by other WA public sector unions in recent months. In October, the United Workers Union, which covers enrolled nurses and other health workers, abandoned its call for a 5 percent pay rise and instructed members to accept the 3 percent offer.

These deals were gifts to the Labor government, which issued a gloating press release aimed at pressuring the nurses to give in, on the basis that “112,000 other public sector employees, equating to three quarters of the sector” had now accepted its “generous” offer. They should serve as a warning to WA nurses that a similar sell-out is being prepared for them.

Nurses and midwives need to take the struggle out of the hands of the ANF bureaucracy, form rank-and-file committees in every hospital and healthcare facility, and develop the widest democratic discussion on how to take forward the fight for decent wages and working conditions. This includes the organisation of further industrial action in defiance of the government and IRC.

Healthcare workers will win enormous support by turning out to other workers confronting similar attacks and by fighting for a fully funded, high-quality, universally and freely accessible public health system. This requires the adoption of a socialist and internationalist perspective, aimed at ensuring that society’s resources are allocated on the basis of people’s needs rather than corporate profit.

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