

Australia: Victorian nurses denounce government-union pay deal

Our reporters
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Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation (ANMF) members in Victoria spoke to WSWs reporters this week, after a 3,000-strong mass meeting on May 20 overwhelmingly rejected a below-inflation pay “offer” concocted in weeks of secret negotiations between the state Labor government and the union leadership.

No details of the proposed deal were presented to nurses by the ANMF leadership until after last week’s mass meeting began and after the union had already lifted “Stage 2” industrial action three days earlier, claiming it had an offer “worth considering.”

In fact, the wage offer was basically the same as one previously rejected at a March 21 mass meeting and would have imposed more real pay cuts on Victoria’s 60,000 public sector nurses and midwives after an effective eight-year wage freeze previously imposed by the union.

Union officials attempted to cover up this reality and push through the deal, claiming improved income through various additional one-off payments and limited incentives, as well as the outcome of an aged care work value case currently before the Fair Work Commission. In fact, the only concrete wage rises included were 3 percent per annum nominal increases, well below the official 3.6 percent inflation rate, and therefore cuts in real terms.

The ANMF leadership immediately resumed negotiations with the government, meeting every day this week with health ministry officials while holding small in-person and online metropolitan and regional meetings to dissipate members’ anger over the cost-cutting pay deal.

In a statement published yesterday, the Health Workers Rank-and-File Committee warned that, unless workers take matters into their own hands, the ANMF bureaucracy will impose a sell-out deal that delivers everything the state Labor government wants.

To prevent this, nurses and midwives need to build rank-and-file committees through which to fight for real

improvements to wages and conditions, based on the actual needs of workers, not what the government says is “affordable.”

Nurses who spoke to WSWs reporters voiced their anger and frustration over the cost-cutting deal and the union’s attempts push it through at the May 20 mass meeting. Fearing victimisation, they have given us different names.

Greg, a Melbourne nurse, said, “The union leadership just read off Power Point slides at the mass meeting, which must have taken about 50 minutes. It was hard to know who was benefitting. You couldn’t work it out because it was so complicated. They could have given us this information before the meeting, but we were presented with it cold, so no one really understood what the offer was and where it was going. I’ve now seen a copy of the deal and it’s clearly a con job.

“If you want people to make an informed decision then you need to tell them what the benefits are, what the risks are and what the alternatives are. None of that was done... It’s basically three percent [per year] plus sweeteners, but the sweeteners are quite nebulous and hard to work out exactly what they are.

“The [Fair Work] value case has yet to flow through, and there is no guarantee that it will, so it should not have been included in the unions’ calculations because it’s just misleading, and deceptive really.

“Nursing is a very physically, mentally and emotionally demanding job and there’s no way people are going to just accept three percent. The union leadership can jazz it up all they like but you go shopping for groceries on the way home after work and the first thing you notice is just how expensive everything is related to your wages.

“It’s immediately evident that prices have gone up and your wages haven’t gone up and there’s the bills. Car registration, for instance has gone up by 10 percent and

that's from the state government and yet we're expected to accept that our wages can only go by three percent," he said.

Helen, another Melbourne nurse, said, "There was a lot of whitewashing by the union at the mass meeting and they were evasive of questions. They were totally taken by surprise and unprepared by the response [from nurses], which I've not really seen before.

"I was around when we took industrial action to secure the [nurse-to-patient] ratios of one-to-four, and one-to-eight overnight. It was a very different climate back then, but I felt a lot more supported by the union then.

"This time around the union is very sanitised and polished and they didn't make public what they had from the government until the [mass] meeting. I don't understand what they were thinking, why they thought it'd be such a good idea to go out like this, with this lack of information, this confusion.

"There were a few good points, such as removal of the sick leave cap and you can take your sick leave from one employer to another. This is a big issue when you get older, but the union leadership didn't address the main issue, which is that our salaries must increase.

"At the online meeting after the [May 20] mass meeting some of the people presenting from the ANMF went into damage control and were trying to keep everyone calm and were open to questions.

"There were some eloquently spoken people who really spoke the truth and asked all the right questions about salaries and how it seems to depend on an outcome from the Fair Work Commission. But no one really knows about that this far in advance and, unless it flows through, we're stuck with a straight 3 and 0.5 percent per year [wage and superannuation increase]. I don't want to sign off on that.

"The union was trying to stay in control and were quite guarded. I'm really disappointed that they weren't transparent. How can such a large organisation like this come to its members with a really unfinished plan, hoping for the best, and then sort of whitewashing people?

"There's a promised \$6,000 payment, which is meant to happen if we sign on to this agreement but that is being taxed so won't be a full \$6,000 by any means. And the promised \$1,000 next financial year is not going to fix people's problems," she said.

Linda, a rural Victorian nurse, said that she travelled to the mass meeting on a bus with other rural nurses.

"When we went in everybody was given a red t-shirt and ready-made placards. It was quite surreal because we

don't have to have placards to tell each other we're feeling undervalued or underpaid," she said.

"It seemed to me that the union thought, 'All we need to do for this enterprise agreement is come up with the slogan "Recruit, Retain, Rebuild," a poster, t-shirts, stickers and placards, then tell the union members 'This is what we're doing, and this is how it's done.'

"It felt very orchestrated, and they haven't carried nurses with them... I think it shows how disconnected the union bureaucracy is from its members, just totally out of touch and their communication obviously did not go to plan.

"The Power Point presentation at the mass meeting was too much and too long-winded. People should have been given it earlier because it wasted a lot of time. Their excuse was it was all confidential and they didn't want it to leak out to any media.

"I've been to several meetings since but still trying to get my head around it. There was so much confusion about the percentage...

"At one local online meeting they presented new slides which were a little bit easier to understand and they tried to explain it a bit better. But when they showed the slide of the wages that we're supposed to get each year, the nurse beside me, who has had management experience added it up straight away, said, 'That's only \$100 more in your pocket over four years. It's nothing.'

"The union now has a defensive tone at the meeting and kept saying, 'Now remember we're a collective. We're just the union for you. You're the union.'

"I've also been very disappointed the union has been very quiet on education or asking nurses to support the Palestinians. There were 3,000 nurses at the mass meeting. What an opportunity to speak about the situation [in Gaza] and convey the message. This should have been brought up. You can't wait for the next delegates' conference if there is a genocide going on.

"Workers have got the power in numbers, but I think it is deplorable that unions haven't acted more strongly on this issue," she said.



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