

Australian union joins pile-on against Bankstown nurses

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A brief online exchange last week between two nurses at Sydney's Bankstown Hospital and Israeli "social media influencer" Max Veifer has been seized upon by the political and media establishment to whip up an atmosphere of hysteria and to claim a "national crisis" of antisemitism.

The campaign is cynical, malicious and is being used to prosecute unstated agendas, above all to demonise mass hostility to the Israeli genocide of Palestinians in Gaza. The comments of the nurses, including statements that they would not treat Israeli patients and would instead "kill" them, were clearly wrong and politically reactionary.

The incident, however, has been blown out of all proportion. Essential elements of context have been buried. Those include the fact that comments made on random webcam chat sites are frequently exaggerated and rarely taken literally. And that Veifer is a well-known provocateur, whose speciality is baiting people into making stupid statements by proclaiming his support for Israel's mass murder of the Palestinians, which is what he did in this instance.

In addition to the viciousness of the attack on the nurses, the campaign against them is striking for involving virtually the entire political and media establishment. Labor government ministers and their nominal Liberal-National opponents have joined hands to denounce the lowly health workers in the most strident tones, as has virtually the entire media.

Of particular significance for workers is the participation in this witch-hunt of the New South Wales Nurses and Midwives' Association (NSWNMA). The union immediately and enthusiastically joined the frenzied attacks on two nurses whom it is supposed to represent.

This went far beyond a statement disavowing the nurses' comments. The NSWNMA, which rarely comments on major political issues and frequently does not even respond to significant developments in the healthcare sector, held a rally against the two Bankstown nurses.

The circumstances of the event underscored the union bureaucracy's contempt for the sentiments and rights of its membership in general, and the legal and democratic rights of the Bankstown nurses in particular.

The union had called a protest against the state Labor government's attacks on nurses' pay and conditions, to be held

outside the NSW parliament on Thursday morning. The NSWNMA has hobbled the fight by nurses, refusing to call strike action or any unified struggle with other health workers, who confront identical attempts to slash their real wages and to enforce unbearable conditions. The rally was not a stoppage, with nurses instead expected to turn up in their own time.

Notwithstanding its token and pathetic character, the protest had some mandate in the hostility of nurses to the gutting of their pay and their onerous conditions. The union leadership ran roughshod over those sentiments, unilaterally cancelling the protest without a fig-leaf of discussion, and transforming it into a "solidarity action against hate speech," targeting the Bankstown nurses.

The NSWNMA announced that change, from a nominally anti-government rally to a pro-government event, on Wednesday evening. The story of the nurses' comments, made last Tuesday night, had only been broken by the media earlier on Wednesday.

When the union leadership took the decision to transform the action, all that was in the public domain were edited excerpts of the interaction, provided by Veifer to right-wing corporate media outlets.

The nurses had already been stood down. However, it was also apparent that they were to be investigated by NSW Police, on the grounds that they may have breached "hate crime" legislation, the penalties for which can include massive fines and even imprisonment.

The decision of the NSWNMA leadership to brand the nurses' comments as "hate speech" was thus utterly prejudicial and a declaration of solidarity with a potential police prosecution. Rather than insist that the legal and democratic rights of the nurses be respected, regardless of their comments, the union bureaucrats aligned themselves with the police and the state.

The event was attended by fewer than a hundred people, many of them bureaucrats from the NSWNMA as well as several other unions, including the RTBU. The speeches were predictable banalities about the impermissibility of hate. Racism and antisemitism were repeatedly referenced, further prejudicing the nurses, who spoke about Israeli nationals but did not mention Jewish people.

In between the guff, several statements underscored the political character of the event.

A representative of the Public Service Association noted that “unions and governments of all persuasions often have disagreements.” But “one thing that we are all united with is that racism and hatred will not win out in the public.” NSWNMA President O’Bray Smith similarly stated: “We all come together. Politicians, nurses, midwives, community members, to say that this is just a moment in time.”

All of these unions are aligned to the Labor Party. Their suggestion that Labor is a key participant in the fight against “hate” and “racism,” emanating from workers, including nurses, is nothing short of obscene.

Labor is a party of imperialist war and reaction. At the federal level, the Labor government of Prime Minister Anthony Albanese is in a contest with the far-right Liberal-National opposition, over which is the harshest towards refugees and immigrants. Labor leaders have venomously attacked refugees as criminals, and late last year passed a mass deportation bill targeting migrants, which could result in more than 80,000 people being kicked out of the country.

One speaker declared: “I think we need to be conscious that the events of yesterday [i.e., the statements of the nurses] have occurred in a context where we are seeing the rise of fascism globally. We are seeing the rise of racism and bigotry across our societies.”

Is the NSWNMA seriously claiming that two nurses in Bankstown, a working-class suburb, one of Afghan and the other of Palestinian heritage, are the embodiment of the “fascist” threat in Australia?

While its deportation bill was clearly inspired by Trump, the Labor government has also fawned over the new administration in the US. Albanese has pledged to collaborate closely with Trump, particularly in a war drive against China, as the fascistic president carries out a war on immigrants, the Constitution and the working class.

In other words, the NSWNMA and the union bureaucracy are in alliance with Labor, while Labor is in alliance with Trump.

The most stark expression of the reemergence of fascistic violence is the US-Israeli genocide of Palestinians in Gaza. The NSWNMA did not bother to mention this at its phoney “hate speech” event, and it has not commented on Trump’s repeated declarations that he will clear Gaza of Palestinians and seize it for the US. The silence of the NSWNMA mirrors that of Albanese, who has repeatedly refused to comment on, much less condemn, Trump’s Hitlerian plan.

None of this is an aberration. Throughout the genocide, the NSWNMA has issued a handful of tepid and mealy-mouthed statements on Gaza, committing the union to nothing. Its first, in October 2023, did not even mention that Israel had begun targeted bombings of hospitals.

As tens of thousands protested this assault on health workers, the NSWNMA pathetically “express[ed] our hope and

solidarity for all Palestinian and Israeli nurses and midwives who are carrying out their duties under extraordinary circumstances.”

In a genocide, faux neutrality and “both-sidesism” is complicity. That has been demonstrated by other unions. Leaders of the Health Services Union, which collaborates with the NSWNMA to keep health workers isolated from one another and to suppress their struggles, have held at least one meeting with the Israeli ambassador, signalling their backing for the Israeli onslaught.

None of the unions have called a single strike or stoppage opposing some of the worst war crimes since the Holocaust. That includes the Maritime Union of Australia, which has enforced the orderly loading of cargo for the Israeli Zim shipping line, which early in the genocide dedicated its entire fleet to the Israeli war effort.

The NSWNMA event served to legitimise the onslaught against the Bankstown nurses, suppress any opposition or questioning over the scale of the campaign against them and ostentatiously signal the bureaucracy’s alignment with the government. The event did nothing to counter “hate speech,” though it should be noted that by the end of the day, one of the Bankstown nurses targeted had been rushed to a hospital with concerns for his well-being amid a mental health crisis.

The event further exposed the rotten, pro-imperialist and anti-working-class character of the union bureaucracy. The attitude of the union officials to the Bankstown nurses is essentially their attitude to the working class itself.

That is not a hypothetical question. Throughout the Israeli onslaught, Zionist supporters of the war have attacked health workers, including nurses. They have reported staff to AHPRA, the regulatory body, in a bid to have them deregistered. None of those health workers have been targeted for making stupid or politically reactionary comments, as did the Bankstown nurses, but simply for voicing their opposition to the genocide. The NSWNMA has rejected calls that it defend those targeted.

To the extent that those victimised workers have been defended, it has been by the rank-and-file organising independently of the bureaucrats. That struggle has to be taken forward and deepened, including through the establishment of rank-and-file committees at all hospitals to defend democratic rights, defeat witch-hunting, and fight the massive assault on public healthcare that has been enforced by Labor governments, collaborating with the NSWNMA, the HSU and other union bureaucracies.



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