

A year after sellout deal

Crisis erupts in New Zealand Nurses Organisation

By Tom Peters
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One year after imposing a sellout agreement on 30,000 nurses and healthcare assistants, the New Zealand Nurses Organisation (NZNO), the country's third-largest union, is embroiled in factional conflict.

On September 16, a special meeting of delegates will vote on a resolution by NZNO's board to remove president Grant Brookes, who was re-elected last year for a three-year term. Meanwhile, a contest is underway for seven seats which are up for election on the 11-member board.

The two factions of the bureaucracy—Brookes and his supporters versus those seeking to oust him—have tactical disagreements but no principled differences. An utterly fraudulent campaign is portraying Brookes as the champion of the “rank-and-file” and “democracy.” His pseudo-left supporters are promoting the lie that the union, deeply discredited among workers after decades of betrayals, is being progressively “reformed” under his leadership.

The reality is that Brookes, the board and unelected NZNO officials were all complicit in pushing through the rotten deal in August 2018, despite widespread opposition from health workers. New Zealand nurses and hospital workers held a nationwide strike on July 12, 2018, part of a resurgence of class struggle in NZ and internationally. This was followed in 2019 by strikes by doctors, anaesthetic technicians, midwives and teachers.

The NZNO sold out this fight, acting as the enforcer of government austerity and setting a benchmark for an effective freeze on wages and conditions throughout the public sector. Union leaders worked with the Labour Party-led government of Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern to push through a miserable pay increase of 3 percent per year for most workers, and a pledge to increase staffing by 2 percent.

The NZNO wore down health workers' opposition by cancelling one of two scheduled strikes, presenting essentially the same offer three times and echoing the government's lie that there was “no more money” for a substantial pay rise and guaranteed staffing ratios.

The attempt to remove Brookes appears to stem from his initial, private disagreement with NZNO industrial services manager Cee Payne's decision to cancel a strike scheduled for July 5. Hundreds of members expressed outrage on Facebook at the anti-democratic move.

At the time, Brookes did not publicly oppose the decision but merely stated that he was not consulted about it. Last month Brookes told Fairfax Media he sent Payne the following message on July 3, 2018: “So you hitched yourself to the wrong wagon? Everyone forgives a single mistake. I'll be in touch. We need you back.”

Brookes said he tried to apologise for the message, but the NZNO hired employment lawyer Steph Dyhrberg to prepare a case for his removal. In a statement in May, Dyhrberg said Brookes' message was “unprofessional, inappropriate, distressing and breached his responsibilities as a board member” and constituted “serious misconduct.”

Brookes has also hired a lawyer and applied to the Employment Relations Authority, the state's industrial relations arbiter, to stop the union from ousting him.

The case against Brookes based on the brief message is ludicrous. But the attempt to paint him as a heroic fighter against the bureaucracy is equally absurd. An open letter issued last month by several delegates supporting Brookes states that he “championed a modernized, democratic, transparent union which fights for positive change and decent pay increases for its members.”

The pseudo-left groups Organise Aotearoa and International Socialist Organisation (ISO), which have

close ties to the unions, have endorsed the open letter and are soliciting donations to Brookes' legal fund.

Workers should not be fooled by this campaign. Brookes, a former member of the pseudo-left group Fightback and the Maori nationalist Mana Party, was first elected NZNO president in 2015 with vague promises to "democratise" the union. For the past four years, however, he stood united with the rest of the NZNO apparatus against healthcare workers.

During the July 12, 2018 strike, Brookes sided with the government against union members. He told a rally in Auckland there was "some truth" to Labour's claim that it couldn't immediately fix the healthcare crisis. He promoted the illusion that things would improve, telling striking workers: "I believe the government and the DHBs [District Health Boards] also want a better health system for us all."

The letter by Brookes' supporters described a "general erosion of freedom of expression and critical thinking in the union." It alleged that NZNO management "asked lawyers to find a way to shut down the NZNO members Facebook page—a page run for and by NZNO members—and received legal advice that this was not possible... [and] tried to ban union organisers from using social media and from visiting nurses on the night shift."

A review of the 2018 campaign commissioned by the NZNO, prepared by former Council of Trade Unions boss Ross Wilson and released last month, noted that union members were required to sit through lengthy ratification meetings for the initial offers and were "barred from voting if they arrived late." It is unclear how many people were prevented from voting.

Brookes did not oppose these anti-democratic actions. He supported the NZNO board when it responded to criticism on social media by threatening members with fines and other disciplinary action.

The NZNO was alarmed at health workers using Facebook to criticise union-backed proposals and discuss their own demands, including a call for an 18 percent pay increase that was dismissed by the NZNO. Wilson's review noted NZNO's "concern" about "political activists, some from outside the union," using social media in "an attempt to influence the ballots."

The Socialist Equality Group published 26 articles and statements on the nurses' dispute on the *World Socialist Web Site*, calling for a political break from the Labour Party and a rebellion against the union bureaucracy. These articles were read by thousands and distributed widely on Facebook.

There remains deep anger towards the NZNO. In recent weeks several comments in the nurses' Facebook group "New Zealand, please hear our voice," have highlighted conditions for NZNO staff, which are much better than those of hospital workers. The bureaucrats get generous subsidies for childcare, five weeks' annual leave, and more sick leave. The NZNO collects more than \$20 million a year in dues, much of which goes to officials' salaries and perks.

The unions ceased to be workers' organisations decades ago. They represent a privileged upper-middle class layer, which works with big business and the government to suppress the class struggle and impose wage cuts, layoffs and other attacks.

Brookes' supporters seek to subordinate workers to the very bureaucracy that carried out the sellout. Organise Aotearoa and the ISO continue to present the 2018 deal as a partial victory, despite reports almost daily pointing to a worsening crisis in public hospitals. The government and unions are presiding over critical shortages of beds, nurses, mental health workers, midwives and specialists.

In opposition to the pseudo-lefts, the Socialist Equality Group calls on workers to adopt a socialist perspective and build new organisations: rank-and-file committees, politically independent of the unions, the Labour Party and all capitalist parties. Such organisations must unite workers throughout New Zealand and internationally against austerity. The fight for well-funded and accessible public healthcare is inseparable from the fight for the socialist reorganisation of society to meet human needs, not private profit.

To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

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