

Nurses take Australian Struggle Forward*

Special report by Lynn Beaton

NURSES in the State of Victoria, Australia, won a decisive victory after a 50-day strike in December.

The victory was inspirational to the Australian working class who, for the past four years, have had their hands tied by the 'Accord' - an agreement between the right-wing Labor government and the trade union bureaucracies which limits industrial negotiation to the confines of a centralised wage-fixing commission.

In return for agreeing to abide by the rules of the 'Accord', trade unionists were promised regular indexed pay increases to maintain their wages at a parity with inflation.

However, this has not happened. In real terms wages have decreased by 9 per cent since the signing of the Accord. Trade union leaders have had their hands full trying to contain their members.

Not only have workers had to suffer a real loss in wages but also many cutbacks to conditions and social services by the Federal and state Labor governments.

Many unions have taken up the cudgels, but they have either been too small and isolated to take on the entrenched bureaucracy, or stifled by their own leaderships.

In October last year, Victorian nurses walked out of the hospitals and began what became an epic and record-making strike.

Their victory has broken the hold of the Labor governments, they have at last been challenged - and by a group of workers who have been seen as among the weakest of all trade unionists: nurses.

Traditionally nurses symbolise the special exploitation of women workers. Their work is highly skilled, requires a long period of training, carries the ultimate responsibility of life and death, requires great physical effort and mental alertness.

Whatever 'value' criteria were used, nurses should be a well-paid profession - and yet they are among the most lowly paid of all workers. The justification for this, that they have a 'vocation' and don't want economic remuneration, is fast losing currency. Nurses are demanding fair pay for the work they do.

In Victoria nurses first began to demand a pay rise in response to a campaign started by the Australian Council of Trade Unions' Working Women's Centre for 'comparable worth' - equal pay for work of equal value.

Although an 'Equal Pay Act' was passed in Australia in 1972, it has been interpreted by the wage-fixing bodies to mean only that those women who worked in occupations identical with men received equal pay. The majority of women however, are employed in separate occupations and their pay rates were not affected by the legislation.

In line with a number of campaigns around the world the ACTU adopted a policy which stated that women working in traditional female occupations should compare the value of their work with similar 'male' occupations.

Nurses began to prepare a case that on this basis they were underpaid. However the ACTU leadership, realising the potential for flow-ons from a successful 'comparable

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worth' case - changed the focus of the nurses' case to one of straightforward work value. .

Much of their case was argued on the grounds of the changing nature of nursing due to new technological development. This isolated the nurses' case from that of other women in traditional female occupations.

Three years of negotiation and manoeuvres by the ACTU, one short strike in 1985 and one solid 50-day strike in 1987 - and the Victorian nurses have a new 'career' structure which gives them a large pay increase and brings them up to the parity of other para-medical workers.

The nurses' strike itself brought to the whole of the Victorian working class a new front on which to fight.

Only months before the strike, the old union leadership of a right-wing clique of ex-matrons were deposed by radical, militant rank-and-file nurses. The new leadership was not prepared to see any compromises and was able to support its members through to the end.

The strike saw large rank-and-file participation. Meetings were held every morning at the union head office. All nurses were invited and at least one representative from each picket line was obliged to attend.

Demonstrations and rallies were held continually, the Labor Government was under constant barrage.

The ACTU tried to intervene but were unsuccessful in their attempts to manoeuvre the 'naïve and inexperienced' nurses into accepting a package from the government which fell far short of their demands.

An interesting feature of the strike compared with the way industrial disputes are being handled here in Britain is that the government at one stage brought out the police to try and stop the nurses picketing laundry trucks going in and out of the hospitals.

The whole exercise was completely unsuccessful and was never tried again. Rumour has it the police refused to attack the nurses, believing they had a fair and just case. Clearly if the Australian government want to ape Thatcher's use of the state in industrial disputes they will have to tighten up the training of their police force.

The victory of the nurses has not only won them a pay increase and career structure which sets precedence in valuing 'women's' work, but it also struck a blow against the government's proposed cuts to health care.

Most important of all it has opened the way for other groups of workers to break the hold that the Labor bureaucracies have held over them.