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THE 1986 VICTORIAN NURSES STRIKE

People and Power: the 1986 Victorian Nurses Strike

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Abstract:

The 1986 Victorian nurses strike was a response to what nurses saw as inadequate working conditions and wages. Nurses felt that these conditions were unfair to them and also compromised patient safety. The strike demonstrated what can be achieved by the solidarity and commitment of workers.

Nurses are traditionally seen as the handmaidens of doctors. They have been perceived by society as nurturers, and therefore devotion to their work is expected to come before anything else. However, in 1986, after years of unsafe workloads, staff shortages, insufficient wages and an unresponsive government, nurses across Victoria decided to break free from their stereotype and take industrial action (ANF, 1996). The resulting events not only significantly changed the public's perception of nurses but also demonstrated what can be achieved through the power of solidarity. From abandoning their no-strike rule in 1983, to an early five day strike in 1985, to the fifty day strike in 1986, Victorian nurses have demonstrated not only dedication to their profession but also an enduring spirit; proving that they deserve to be taken seriously as professionals.

The Victorian Trained Nurses Association was formed in 1901 (ANMF, 2017), led by Dr J.W. Springthorpe. Before this time, nursing required no qualifications and therefore there was no mandatory formal training. As a result, they faced unreasonable working conditions, such as working for 52 hours per week. The Victorian Trained Nurses Association developed standard training and accreditation for nurses to complete before they could be employed, from 1901 onwards. An account describe nurses being taught "basic tasks such as how to make up poultices, give enemas, apply leeches and how to make a bed" (ANMF, 2017). In 1924, the Royal Australian Nursing Federation (RANF) was formed which then united the nursing profession across all states and territories.

In 1934, the Victorian Trained Nurses Association was replaced with the Royal Victorian College of Nursing (ANMF, 2017). This organisation began to act as a trade union as well as an educational centre, working to protect the rights of nurses as workers (ANMF, 2017). Nurses were further united in 1975, when the RANF Victorian Branch and the Royal Victorian College of Nursing combined "to become a combined professional and industrial organisation" (ANMF, 2017). They continued to advocate for increased wages and managed to secure increases of approximately 10 and 17 percent. (ANMF, 2017).

Although the 1986 dispute was largely about nurses' wages, former nursing supervisor at Western General Hospital, Isabell Collins said in an article in *The Age* titled 'Revolution in our Hospitals' - "[The strike] is about keeping nurses in the profession." She explained that the lack of career structure and tough working conditions on top of the insufficient wages was causing nurses to leave the profession, resulting in staff shortages. Young, inexperienced nurses were therefore often left to bear the burden. Ms Collins said "A student nurse was trying to cope with 10 patients. She left one on a bedpan to attend to another. The first patient ... tried to get off the bedpan alone. The patient fell out of bed, received head injuries and died." (*The Age* pg. 28 12/11/1986). This article reflects the desperation felt by nurses across Victoria at the health system that was preventing them from caring for their patients adequately.

A major precursor to the 1986 nurses strike occurred in 1983, when the members of the RANF Victorian Branch voted overwhelmingly to remove the no-strike clause from their constitution. In her report in the RANF newsletter, secretary Barbara Carson stated that "The Federation is now a force to be reckoned with. The nursing profession now has a much stronger bargaining power in its negotiations for improved conditions." (*RANF News, Victorian Branch, 1983*). In October 1985, Victorian nurses went on strike for five days, with Ms Carson stating in *The Age* "The government has been indifferent to the RANF ... here's how we feel about that" (*ANMF, 2018*).

After the five days of strike (October 17-21, 1985) a partial agreement was reached and nurses returned to work. The Labor government (including premier John Cain and health minister David White) promised an Industrial Relations Commission (IRC) hearing to review the RANF's demands (*Ross, 1987 pg. 6*). The IRC issued an award in June 1986. On the surface it granted the nursing profession increased funding and an improved career structure. However, these new classifications resulted in many nurses being demoted into lower positions which therefore did not result in higher wages for most. Midwives, for example, were placed in Grade 1 (the lowest level) despite an extra year of study compared with ordinary nurses. As a further measure in August 1986, the IRC significantly reduced qualification allowances, which were bonus payments nurses received for completion of each of their certificates (*Tierney and Cregan, 2013*). This last action prompted the RANF to hold a number of stopwork meetings over the next months (see Figure 1).

Negotiations with the health minister David White ensued, but without success. At the stopwork meeting on October 30th, 1986, Victorian nurses voted to strike commencing the following day. The RANF submitted a list of conditions required before nurses returned to work. The list took issue with several decisions from the June award including "the cut in the maximum Qualification Allowance from \$54.80 to just \$19.00 per week ... the decision not to award any increases to students and first year RNs [Registered Nurses] and the decision to reclassify almost 50% of nurses as Grade 1 RNs" (*ANF, 1996*)

The strike was carried out in stages to keep the event in the media. A skeleton staff (considered to be a safe number of nurses) was left to care for patients in critical care wards. Newly elected RANF Victorian Branch secretary Irene Bolger (Barbara Carson having resigned in January 1986) led the first walkouts from Western General Hospital (November 5, 1986). Ms Bolger told the press "The nurses of this hospital have done a very brave thing today ... it is something that had to be done, I believe, for us to win this ... because if we don't win this, nursing in this state will be destroyed." (*ANF, 5 November 1986*).

The government threatened the RANF with police involvement and on November 6th, the IRC issued a return to work order. However, the nurses were determined and the walkouts continued. Picket lines were constructed around hospitals to ensure the nurses' struggle was seen by the community (see Figure 2). Nurses also restricted the trucks supplying hospitals with non-essential goods such as linen.

Living on the picket lines took a toll on nurses, emotionally and financially. They were dealing with the guilt of leaving their patients, criticism in the media and the cessation of their income. Going without wages in the lead-up to Christmas particularly affected nurses who were mothers. Current Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation (the RANF was renamed in 2013) secretary Lisa Fitzpatrick described "how one nurse wrote and said ... she'd explained to her young children that Santa Claus was really tight this year. She didn't have any money and was asking for money from the strike fund." (*ANMF, 2018*). To support both morale and funding, nurses on the picket lines organised fundraising events like sporting competitions and barbecues. This activity raised \$200,000 by November 13th, 1986 (*Tierney and Cregan, 2013*).

The nurses largely maintained the support of the general public throughout their strike, despite criticism in newspaper editorials and opposition by the government. Nurses hold an important position in many people's lives and are highly regarded by the public. Therefore the decision to go on strike was difficult as it had the potential to jeopardise this trust. Nurses faced the difficult task of convincing people that the strike was not only important but a last resort, and overall they were successful. Letters in *The Age* show overwhelming encouragement to the nurses and anger towards the government. "All the governments in my life time have shamefully exploited the nurses." (Walter Raymond Burgess, *The Age* pg. 12 12/11/1986), and "I wish the hardworking, dedicated, naïve and self-sacrificing nurses the best of luck in their fight for long-awaited justice." (Gwen Coruana, *The Age* pg. 12 5/11/1986) are two examples of many. The public support for the strike was a key factor in its success. As well as sending letters of encouragement and donating money, members of the public tooted car horns outside hospitals where picket lines were set up to express their support, and offered supplies like toilets, telephones and food.

The IRC refused to negotiate while nurse remained on strike and the government would not arbitrate without the IRC, so by mid-November, the RANF realised the situation was at a stalemate. Nurses voted to further the action and began to withdraw their labour from critical care wards. The government responded by threatening to recruit nurses from England and Ireland to replace the strikers (ANMF, 2018). With this possibility, the RANF approached the ACTU (Australian Council of Trade Unions) and together they put forward a proposal to the IRC for the government to consider. This was in combination with a desperate state of Victorian hospitals - gravely ill people were unable to secure places and the rate of operations was forced to significantly decrease (Tierney and Cregan, 2013). On 19 December 1985, the Cain government backed down and agreed to the joint RANF-ACTU package, awarding nurses the improvements they had sought. Nurses voted to return to work on 20 December. The IRC issued the formalised agreement in January 1987 (ANMF, 2018).

There are several elements that made the 1986 Victorian nurses strike such a significant achievement. Given the expectation for nurses to be submissive and put their patients first, the vote to strike was met with hostility from members of the government, newspapers and other medical professionals. Striking nurses not only had to overcome this, but also the guilt at leaving their patients, financial strain and worrying whether the weeks of going without pay would be worth it. This demonstrated the nurses' reluctance to leave their patients and yet their determination to succeed, as they knew that the better working conditions they sought would improve patient health and safety in the future.

In terms of people and power, the strike is an example of the importance of trade unions, and how they can achieve justice for workers. Trade unions like the RANF (Victorian branch) traditionally provide people with power by enabling workers to have a say in decisions affecting their profession. Yet historically, unions have been accused of getting their way too easily. Often, they have been vilified by the public for having too much power and influence over governments (ANMF, 2017). The 1986 nurses strike defied this, however. The nurses' union demonstrated that workers can make themselves heard without political support and genuinely use the power of united people to take industrial action while at the same time maintaining the support of the general public.

Despite the striking nurses facing government and newspaper editorial criticism for being uncaring or unreasonable, nurses managed to prove that workers can protect their rights and succeed against a determined employer while maintaining solidarity and commitment to their work. The 1986 Victorian nurses strike is significant not only for the success of the RANF in stating their case, but also for the sacrifices made and odds overcome by nurses in order to pursue their cause. In fighting for better pay and working conditions, nurses were also fighting to protect the health system. The

1986 Victorian nurses strike is therefore a significant example of a united people exercising their power to achieve improvements in society.



Figure 1 Nurses and midwives gather en masse

Source: ANMF, 2018



Figure 2 Picket line outside Epworth Hospital

Source: ANMF, 2018

Abbreviations:

ACTU Australian Council of Trade Unions

ANF Australian Nursing Federation*

ANMF Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation*

IRC Industrial Relations Commission

RANF Royal Australian Nursing Federation*

* Original name was RANF. The 'Royal' prefix was dropped in the 1980s and then the organisation was renamed ANMF in 2013, to acknowledge the specialist skills of midwives.

Bibliography:

Primary Sources:

Gwen Coruana, Letter, *The Age* (Melbourne), 5 November 1986, 12

A letter written to The Age newspaper by a citizen early on in the strike. Evidence of public support for the RANF

Irene Bolger, (November 5, 1986). 'Irene's speeches during the strike: at Western General Hospital' November 5th 1986.

http://www.womenaustralia.info/image_viewer.htm?objects/images/ANF005_005.jpg,D00799

A transcript of the speech delivered by then RANF secretary Irene Bolger to the press outside Western General Hospital. This was one of the first hospitals to strike and so Bolger is explaining the nurses' position and why they are taking such extreme action. As the transcript comes from the Australian Nursing Federation archives and is therefore highly accurate and reliable.

Editorial, 'Nurses Running out of Credit', *The Age* (Melbourne), 5 November 1986, 13

A piece written by then editor of The Age newspaper Creighton Burns. Evidence of the media's lack of support for the nurses and allegiance to the government. Despite the bias, however, The Age is a reputable and accurate source of factual information.

Editorial, 'Nurses must not Win', *The Age* (Melbourne), 12 November 1986, 13

As above.

Barbara Hutton, 'Revolution in our Hospitals', *The Age* (Melbourne), 12 November 1986, 28

An article written in the age by Barbara Hutton. The article gives some context for the strike including quotations from interviews with prominent nurses at the time. The piece is written in an objective tone, yet overall it paints a bleak picture of the nurses' working conditions.

Royal Australian Nursing Federation, Victorian Branch. (1983, December). nurses vote for right to strike. *RANF News* [Melbourne], p. 1.

http://www.womenaustralia.info/image_viewer.htm?objects/images/ANF.UDS2012382-1_Page_18.jpg,D00831

An address from secretary of the RANF Barbara Carson, published in the Federation's newspaper. Carson announces that nurses had voted to abandon the 'no-strike' in their constitution. The information in this source is accurate and reliable, although Carson's position could lead to some bias towards the nurses in her writing.

Pam Swirski, Letter, *The Age* (Melbourne), 12 November, 1986, 12

A letter to The Age newspaper, showing evidence of continued public support throughout the strike.

Secondary Sources:

Australian Nursing Federation, 'Celebrating the Spirit – Victorian Nursing 10 Years on', 1996.

<http://www.womenaustralia.info/objects/images/ANF004.pdf>

A pamphlet created by the ANF to commemorate the ten year anniversary of the strike. The pamphlet summarises the major components of the strike. Some of the statistics provided were difficult to corroborate as no other source found contained this information, but as it came from the ANF itself, the facts are likely to be accurate. There were some more subjective sections of the pamphlet that show bias towards the RANF, portraying the government as incompetent and hostile.

Australian Nursing and Midwifery Education. (2017). Our history.

<https://www.anmfvic.asn.au/about-us/history>

A page from the Australian Nursing and Midwifery Education website. It gives a timeline of nursing from the early 1900s to 2017. The source is accurate and reliable as it is written by members of the ANMF who likely have the best access to information about the history of nursing.

Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation. (2018, September 20). The 1986 50-day Victorian nurses and midwives strike.

<https://otr.anmfvic.asn.au/articles/the-1986-50-day-victorian-nurses-and-midwives-strike>

A digital exhibition created by the ANMF which tells the story of the 1986 nurses strike. The page combines external primary sources e.g. photographs, quotes and secondary sources e.g. recent interviews with striking nurses. While there is some bias towards the RANF, the source is highly reliable in conveying the feelings of nurses during the strike.

Nelson, S., & Grehan, M. (2008). eMelbourne. In *Home - eMelbourne - The Encyclopedia of Melbourne Online*.

<http://www.emelbourne.net.au/biogs/EM01071b.htm>

A page from The Encyclopedia of Melbourne Online outlining the history of the nursing profession. It corroborates with the information provided by the ANMF website, suggesting that both are accurate. This webpage goes further back in history, to the mid-nineteenth century and describes the beginning of the idea of public nurses as well as the development of the profession.

Tierney, J., & Cregan, C. (2013). *A 'Blueprint' for Union Organising: Multiplying the membership in the Australian Nursing Federation (Victorian Branch) 1989-2012 - The 1986 50-Day Strike*. Retrieved from Australian Women's Archives Project website:

<http://www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/anfv/strike.html>

A university Honours thesis describing the 1986 nurses strike. The source outlined key factors in the strike and analysed the event itself, including evidence from both sides of the dispute to remain objective. As a published report, this source is likely to be reliable and it also corroborates with several of the other sources above, including the ANMF website and newspaper articles, showing it to be accurate.