

Australia: Victorian paramedics protest for safer conditions

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Around 500 paramedic, ambulance and MICA (mobile intensive care ambulance) workers rallied in central Melbourne yesterday to demand that the Victorian Labor government extend between-shift breaks from 8 to 10 hours and grant 6 percent annual pay rises over the next three years.

Negotiations between Premier John Brumby's administration, Ambulance Victoria, and the Ambulance Employees Association (AEA) over a new enterprise bargaining agreement have dragged on for more than a year, with the Labor government refusing to concede to paramedics' demands for safer working conditions and better wages.

On July 22 the federal Labor government's new Fair Work Australia (FWA) industrial relations tribunal banned the workers from taking planned strike action. In a ruling which clearly demonstrated the anti-working class character of the Rudd government's new workplace laws, FWA ordered a 21-day negotiating period, during which time paramedics are not supposed to talk with the media. (See: "Labor government's new industrial relations body bans paramedic strike")

Yesterday's rally took place after a two-hour meeting at the Victorian Trades Hall Council. Participants decided to refuse to work overtime on their days off. According to the *Age*, the AEA said this was not an overtime ban, but an indication that workers had decided to "withdraw their goodwill in regard to days off".

Several paramedics told the WSWS that a Fair Work Australia official was discovered taking notes in the meeting. Angry workers demanded he leave; one paramedic said the incident showed the government

had "sent in their spies".

Hundreds of uniformed paramedics marched first to Victorian Health Minister Daniel Andrews's office, before rallying outside Premier Brumby's office in Spring Street. Many had travelled hundreds of kilometres, from regional towns such as Orbost, Warrnambool and Geelong, to attend the protest. Some had made their own banners, including: "Give us a break Mr Brumby, a 10-hour break", "Brumby fix our ambo crisis" and "Fatigue kills people, a 10-hour break kills fatigue".

The determination and anger of the protesting paramedics was in sharp contrast to their union officials, whose overriding priority is to head off any political challenge to the state and federal Labor governments.

In what amounted to an extraordinary cover-up, AEA state secretary Steve McGhie made no mention of Labor's Fair Work Australia, including the tribunal's banning of the proposed strike action, when he addressed the paramedics yesterday. McGhie and other union officials told workers to pressure Andrews and Brumby by signing petitions and phoning their offices.

McGhie also declared that paramedics had improved productivity and would continue to make the necessary sacrifices. According to McGhie, "We save up to 500 more lives per year, guess how much the government values 500 lives? The cost savings to the community are enormous; none of it is directed to you, the paramedics." Despite ambulance workers having widespread public support, the AEA barely campaigned to publicise the rally.

WSWS reporters spoke to several paramedics, some of whom asked not to be identified for fear of reprisals.

Jim, from a town in eastern Victoria, had travelled since 4.30 a.m. to attend the rally. "The government is

playing to the big end of town,” he said. “They are using Fair Work Australia as their tool. The FWA is not neutral at all. This is a test case. We are going to strike—they are going to have to try us. What can they do to us?”

A paramedic from Geelong said: “We are working to rule. We have to bring political pressure as well as workplace pressure—we have to get our message to the public. The government relies on us doing all extra shifts. It is beyond a joke.

“You are bound by what your employers want you to do... What is happening is that even past their [minimum working hours] threshold, paramedics are covering spare shifts. People are tired and past it. This compromises the care we can give to the public.

“We want to be treated as professionals. We want to be recognised for the qualifications that we have. On the road autonomously, we make the decisions that affect the people. The government is refusing to acknowledge our work. Brumby gets in the media and says ‘we are providing a world class service’. They won’t say that to the staff. They ignore us.

“It doesn’t matter which party is in parliament, whether it is Labor or Liberal, they are both the same. Labor is supposed to represent working people in parliament—but they don’t seem to. ‘Strike and you’ll be punished.’ They threaten the big stick. It is the same with the fire services. The faults have been identified, but nothing is done about it. It is all about cost—the bottom line. The government don’t want to pay out. They want to pay us as little as possible.”

A paramedic from the Melbourne metropolitan Bayside Depot described the appalling conditions. “I have been on the job for 10 years,” she said. “At present my base salary is \$48,000, but with overtime—necessary to afford my bills and feed my kids—I eventually earned around \$72,000 last year. For the large amount of skills I have, this is just enough for me to live.

“We are the only section of health workers that are trained to administer drugs apart from doctors and yet we’re not recognised for those skills. I’ve seen our conditions deteriorate incredibly in the ten years I have worked. The work load has increased, I am more skilled, but the conditions have worsened. I get no extra pay for all the extra training and skills and terrible hours I have to work. I’ve had to give up a lot of time

that I could be spending with my kids.

“We don’t get meal breaks half the time. The other night I started at 5 p.m., we had a meal break at 11.30 p.m., then a whole lot of jobs before getting back to branch and having a shower—I had blood all over me. Then the next break was at 4.30 a.m. for a 7 a.m. finish. The last shift I did, I got sent to Ballarat driving and didn’t get back until 9 am the next day—I probably worked 14 to 16 hours.

“There are also bad effects on you mentally. It’s actually not so much the mangled people that affect me, but the pensioners who are starving and just fading away in their homes. They have no support or money, so they call the ambulance when they need help. I have seen some emaciated people living in their home—they looked like they were from a concentration camp. They are the things that stick with me.

“Forget about a social life or going out for dinner, you can never make plans after a shift, as you never finish on time and it is just expected from you. Sometimes they just keep dispatching you after you have finished.

“We have resolved that none of this union’s money is to go to the ALP. The ALP promised in 1999 if we help get them into power they would help us. Every time we have tried to strike, they have taken that right away from us, saying that we’re endangering the public, but we have not.

“In the union meeting today the Fair Work representative was actually sitting in on our closed meeting—he just snuck in and started taking notes... They declared all our industrial action illegal, everything. We were considering unprotected industrial action and the FWA representative got up in the meeting and advised us against it. What are they going to do, sack us all?”



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