

Australia: Growing opposition among Victorian paramedics to Brumby-union sell out deal

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Opposition is rapidly developing among Victorian paramedics against an “in principle” three-year industrial agreement announced by the state Labor government and Ambulance Employees Association (AEA) on August 11. The sell-out agreement—which follows a 15-month industrial campaign waged by paramedic, ambulance and MICA (mobile intensive care ambulance) workers—entrenches sub-standard and dangerous working conditions and imposes a real wage cut.

On August 19, nearly 100 MICA paramedics organised a meeting in Melbourne, independently of the union, to discuss the proposed agreement.

MICA paramedics are the most skilled category, requiring minimum four years’ tertiary education and extensive additional training. Almost all of them—300, including 40 paramedics in the Air Wing helicopter service—have resigned their positions of responsibility, with their resignations to take effect on September 9. MICA workers have said they will then revert to general duties, refusing to use several techniques for patients who suffer cardiac arrest or brain injury. The *Herald Sun* has reported, however, that Ambulance Victoria yesterday issued a “stark ultimatum” to the ambulance workers, warning that mass sackings could follow any resignations.

MICA paramedics receive a salary of up to \$60,000—far below what many professionals receive with equivalent qualifications and training in other sectors. They are demanding a \$100 a week raise and have described the government’s offer of \$21.50 as an “insult”. Moreover, they believe the government’s proposed new method of calculating overtime payments will leave them worse off, especially those paramedics working in regional and rural areas.

“It is very frustrating—we followed the rules of management—we had the vote to take strike action,” one MICA worker, who asked not to be identified for fear of being fined or sacked by Ambulance Victoria, told the *World Socialist Web Site*. “Then Fair Work Australia pulled the cart out from under us. As was said in the meeting—we’ve got to dig our heels in. Something has to give somewhere. People are talking about the possibility there will be mass sackings. But if that happened,

the rest of the workforce would be very indignant and up in arms. On September 9 it will come to the crunch... I’ve figured out I will lose \$18,000 over three years. It is a bad agreement and the government is rubbing its hands over this. We haven’t had a wage increase since 2007. I’ve worked out we had to get 10 percent up to today, to even meet up with CPI [consumer price index]. It is a sell out.”

Opposition to the agreement extends throughout the different sections of ambulance workers. An August 13 article posted on the *Geelong Advertiser* web site included readers’ comments. One anonymous paramedic wrote: “I feel completely let down by the union, Ambulance Victoria and the Government. We are no better off under this ‘deal’. I do not accept it and neither do a number of my colleagues I have spoken to. I do not see how the union thought it was a good idea to accept this deal and then speak on my behalf that it was a good outcome!”

Another wrote: “I am a paramedic and the offer is an insult and I will not be voting for it full stop.” The wife of a paramedic wrote saying she found “the way they have been treated appalling!! 10 hour breaks between shifts are one thing, but it would be nice for them to be given the opportunity to have a short break during their shifts as well!! Do we really want paramedics working on our loved ones when they have not even had enough time to have a drink of water or something to eat in a 14 hour shift!! The pay rates and conditions are disgusting, the new deal won’t change a thing!”

A Facebook page created to support the paramedics’ industrial campaign has also featured several comments from ambulance workers in opposition to the deal. One posted a copy of an email circulating among the workers that highlights the negative impact of the proposed three-year wage agreement.

The ambulance workers had demanded a 6 percent annual pay increase for the next three years to achieve parity with nurses and other similar healthcare professionals. The government-union deal grants a 2.5 percent nominal increase—effectively a real wage cut, given that 2.5 percent is equivalent to the current CPI (consumer price index measure of inflation), but with no back pay for the time since the last Enterprise Bargaining Agreement expired. Moreover, there is

no automatic cost of living indexation, meaning that if, as expected, inflation increases beyond 2.5 percent in the next three years, paramedics' real wages will be further eroded. Most paramedics currently receive a top baseline salary of a paltry \$53,000.

Labor Premier John Brumby's government has also extracted other concessions, such as a more exacting method of calculating overtime rates that will effectively reduce the hourly rate. The precise mechanism for the overtime calculation remains unclear. Paramedics are yet to see the full text of the agreement and have only been selectively informed of some of the provisions.

Brumby and the AEA are trying to keep paramedics in the dark about the details of the agreement for as long as possible, to prevent the membership from having time to adequately scrutinise and discuss the deal before they vote on it in around four weeks.

The agreement itself was stitched up two weeks ago, at 11.58 p.m. on August 11, two minutes before the 21-day negotiating period, ordered by the federal Labor government's Fair Work Australia (FWA) industrial relations body, expired. The three-week negotiations on the deal came after the Brumby government successfully won an FWA ruling banning a proposed paramedics' strike, scheduled to begin on July 22. The ruling represented an outright attack on the democratic right of the workers to take industrial action in defence of wages and conditions.

Nevertheless, Ambulance Employees Association state secretary Steve McGhie immediately declared that he "accepted the decision" of the FWA tribunal. He has now declared the union-government deal a "victory" on the basis that the government has conceded an extension of between-shifts break time from 8 to 10 hours—one of the main demands raised by the AEA during the paramedics' industrial campaign. "This is not just a win for paramedic safety, this is a win for the safety of all Victorians," McGhie declared.

McGhie's claim is not only false. It reveals the contemptuous attitude of the union towards its membership.

In the first place, having 10- rather than 8-hour breaks will not resolve the underlying, and long outstanding, fatigue and safety issues. During their campaign, paramedics highlighted the impact of back-to-back shifts that may each last 14, 15, or even more hours, sometimes without a meal break. A 10-hour break between two 15-hour shifts remains completely insufficient to ensure that paramedics receive adequate rest and nourishment. Ambulance crashes, incorrect dispensation of medicines, and other fatigue-related accidents will inevitably continue.

Secondly, there is evidence indicating that the Brumby government's supposed initial intransigence over the 10-hour break issue was designed to allow the AEA to claim a "victory" when the measure was finally announced. A leaked email to Ambulance Victoria CEO Greg Sassella from a former senior

manager on April 24—four months ago—referred to discussions held with an adviser to Health Minister Daniel Andrews and admitted: "the advice we are getting indicates that we probably have to concede the 10 hours eventually".

The Brumby government's decision to continue its assault on the paramedics' working conditions and workplace safety points to the real motivations underlying the government-union agreement—to ensure that the full burden of the deepening global financial and economic crisis is laid squarely on the backs of the working class. Not only the rights and conditions of paramedics, but of all healthcare and public sector workers, will be further gutted, along with the provision of basic public facilities and social services.

McGhie is already insisting that had a deal not been reached, the dispute would have gone to compulsory arbitration, which "could have taken nine months [and] there would have been no guarantee of 10-hour rest breaks being introduced."

The union will no doubt press this argument over the next few weeks to try to intimidate paramedics into voting for the agreement.

Exactly the same tactic was employed by the Victorian Australian Education Union leadership last year when, in the name of securing a major "victory", it sold out the teachers' protracted industrial campaign for better wages and school conditions.

In order to defend wages and conditions, as well as the safety and rights of themselves and their patients, paramedics should follow the lead of the MICA workers and convene independent rank and file meetings to conduct a full and detailed review of the proposed agreement and its consequences. This will require making a conscious political break with the pro-capitalist, anti-working class program of the trade unions and turning out to other sections of public sector health and other workers to mobilise them in a unified, independent struggle against the Rudd and Brumby Labor governments' assault on jobs, living standards and democratic rights.



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