

Australia: Specialist paramedics threatened with punitive sanctions

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Mobile Intensive Care Ambulance (MICA) paramedics met in Melbourne, Victoria on Saturday and resolved to proceed with their planned resignations, to take effect this Wednesday, in protest over a proposed industrial deal agreed by the state Labor government and the Ambulance Employees Australia (AEA) union. The specialist paramedics were not intimidated by threatened sanctions under the federal Labor government's industrial tribunal, Fair Work Australia.

Ambulance Victoria (AV) last week sent intimidatory letters to each of the 330 MICA paramedics who have submitted their resignations. One of the letters, dated September 3 and signed by Acting Regional General Manager Tony Oxford, stated: "A failure or refusal by you to perform work as required and directed constitutes unprotected industrial action under the Fair Work Act 2009, and will breach your contract of employment with AV. You are advised that AV is considering the options available to it in relation to the threatened withdrawal of the provision of MICA clinical care, including an application to Fair Work Australia for an order to prevent you from organising or engaging in unprotected industrial action."

The threatened intervention of Fair Work Australia (FWA) into the unresolved paramedics' dispute again underscores the determination of the federal Labor government of Prime Minister Kevin Rudd and its Victorian state counterpart of Premier John Brumby to forcibly ram through—with the full cooperation of the paramedics' union—a regressive three-year industrial agreement that entrenches dangerous working conditions and delivers a real wage cut.

In July, FWA intervened to ban proposed strike action by the paramedics. This move came after a 15-month industrial campaign, demanding a 6 percent annual pay increase to deliver parity with other health professionals. Paramedics are among the most poorly paid professional workers—receiving base salaries of between \$50,000 and

\$60,000. Their demands also included extended breaks between shifts. The current eight-hour break between back-to-back shifts that typically last 15 or 16 hours has caused many fatigue-related public safety and paramedic health problems.

On August 11, at the end of a 21-day negotiating period ordered by FWA, the state government and the AEA announced an "in principle" agreement which delivered a nominal wage rise of 2.5 percent—effectively a real wage cut—and a two-hour extension of the break period between shifts. The sell-out deal has generated increasing anger and opposition among many paramedics. (See: "Growing opposition among Victorian paramedics to Brumby-union sell out deal")

Opposition is especially intense among MICA paramedics. The specialist ambulance workers undertake two years of study and training in addition to the four years required to become a fully-trained paramedic. Their specialist duties include placing people with critical head injuries into an induced coma to minimise brain damage, and advanced treatment for cardiac arrest. MICA paramedics receive a top base salary of about \$60,000. The government-union deal works out to an additional \$21.50 a week—far short of the \$100 a week raise demanded.

MICA workers have reported that in many cases they would actually earn more if they gave up specialist duties and served as a standard ambulance paramedic. They now plan to resign on Wednesday, reverting to non-MICA duties.

Ambulance Victoria, however, has warned that it will not permit this. Last week's letter stated: "You are required to perform all of the duties that are within the limits of your skill, competence and training [and] are unable to unilaterally resign from the performance of your full duties as MICA Paramedic and elect to perform partial duties at the clinical level on an ALS Paramedic without the agreement of

AV.”

The letter also insisted that the union-government deal had been finalised and that “there are no further opportunities for the negotiation of additional claims”. Ambulance Victoria pointed to the position of the paramedics’ union: “Yesterday, the AEA-V [Ambulance Employees Australia Victorian branch], as the chosen Bargaining Agent for all classifications of staff covered by this Agreement, again confirmed in writing to AV that it is committed to the terms of the in-principle Agreement and would continue to recommend the Agreement to its members, including the improved terms and conditions proposed for MICA staff.”

The 100 MICA paramedics who met at the AEA offices on Saturday defied the intense pressure and took an important stand by voting to proceed with their threatened resignations.

After the meeting, a MICA spokesman informed the *World Socialist Web Site*: “At this stage the resolve of 330 of 350 MICA paramedics is clear—we have put in the resignations to go back to general duties as ambulance paramedics. The resolve stands and we’ll be continuing that way as of Wednesday 9 September... The information has been conveyed to the government. It has been conveyed to Ambulance Victoria. We’ve given a month’s notice... They need to put in a contingency plan, but at this stage there doesn’t seem to be a clear contingency to address this.”

The *Age* published two paramedics’ letters today. Mike Economovich wrote: “We face being sacked, yet our resolve is still firm... MICA paramedics have patiently waited to be given due recognition, accepting slight increases in pay in the hope of having professional status bestowed upon us. When this didn’t happen, we considered not taking on any more skills but we don’t do stagnation well. But after enduring years of slights (and sleights of hand), we finally realised we shouldn’t be treated this way: professionalism demands recognition and fair treatment.”

Damien Dambrosi added: “On Wednesday I will revert to being a standard ambulance paramedic. I am giving up something I value highly because I am tired of the false promises made by Ambulance Victoria and the Brumby Government. We willingly take on new skills, naively believing promises of remuneration... The way I understand it, bureaucrats save millions and get paid thousands in bonuses on top of their already high wages. Well done! Saving millions is bankable productivity. Saving lives isn’t.”

The AEA has issued verbal expressions of support for the MICA workers while at the same time doing everything possible to isolate them from other paramedics and prevent their action from sparking a broader movement against the proposed industrial agreement.

Paramedics continue to be kept in the dark by their union—a vote on the agreement is due to be held in two or three weeks, but the full text of the document is yet to be distributed. AEA state secretary Steve McGhie and other bureaucrats have argued that the agreement must be ratified, irrespective of its content, because the only alternative is compulsory arbitration under FWA, a protracted process that would supposedly deliver an even worse outcome.

However, to reject the proposed agreement is not to accept a FWA-imposed outcome. In order to defend wages and conditions, as well as the safety and rights of themselves and their patients, paramedics should convene independent rank-and-file meetings to conduct a full and detailed review of the proposed agreement and its consequences. This discussion should be the starting point of a political and industrial campaign, involving paramedics turning out to other sections of public sector health and other workers, against the Rudd and Brumby Labor governments’ assault on jobs, living standards and democratic rights. Such an opposition movement in turn requires a conscious political break with the pro-business program of the trade unions and the fight for socialist policies that put the social needs of working people ahead of private profit.



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