

Australia: Ambulance union sells out MICA paramedics campaign

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The federal and state Labor governments, acting in concert with the Ambulance Employees Association (AEA), mounted a major operation this week to suppress a campaign by around 300 highly-trained Mobile Intensive Care Ambulance (MICA) paramedics in defence of their wages and working conditions.

A meeting of MICA workers on Saturday reconfirmed their decision to resign en masse as of September 9 and revert to lower duties rather than accept the terms of an agreement reached between Ambulance Victoria and the AEA union. Late on Monday, Fair Work Australia, the federal industrial relations body, backed an application by Ambulance Victoria for the planned resignations to be declared “unprotected” industrial action and therefore illegal.

The ruling threatened punitive fines of \$32,000 a day against the union and \$6,000 a day against individual workers if the resignations went ahead. In establishing Fair Work Australia, the Labor government of Prime Minister Rudd outlawed virtually all industrial action and made any “unprotected” action subject to a series of draconian penalties.

Ambulance Victoria had already sent letters to all workers informing them of its Fair Work Australia application and warning that refusal “to perform work as required and directed” constituted “a breach of contract”—a clear threat of dismissal.

Within hours of the Fair Work Australia ruling, the AEA raced into a new round of negotiations with Ambulance Victoria and the Victorian government’s Department of Human Services to broker a sell-out deal and to end the planned action by the paramedics.

Under enormous pressure, above all from the union, MICA rank-and-file representatives took part in the meeting and acquiesced to the deal. They had mistakenly believed that by threatening resignations rather than a strike they would avoid punitive legal action.

Monday’s decision was Fair Work Australia’s second intervention in the Victorian ambulance dispute. In July, the Rudd government’s agency banned industrial action by ambulance workers and imposed a compulsory 21-day negotiating period. The AEA immediately called off its planned strike, entered negotiations and brokered a regressive in-principle agreement on August 11 that effectively cut real wages and enshrined unsafe working conditions.

These interventions highlight the role of the Labor government. Far from ending the industrial relations regime of former Prime Minister Howard, the Rudd government established Fair Work Australia to further straitjacket workers and suppress their struggles. The unions act as the agency’s enforcers, using the threat of fines and other punitive action to bludgeon their members into line.

Emerging from negotiations on Tuesday, AEA Victorian secretary Steve McGhie described the latest agreement as “a compromise”. In reality, the deal is a betrayal of everything that the MICA paramedics have been fighting for.

These highly-trained workers, who receive annual salaries of between \$50,000 and \$60,000, were seeking a \$100 a week pay rise to reflect their skill levels and

specialist duties. The deal does not alter the 2.5 percent pay increase contained in the overall enterprise agreement covering all 2,700 ambulance officers reached on August 11. For MICA workers, that would mean an additional \$21.50 a week on their current base rate.

The agreement struck on Tuesday raises pay levels marginally through a sleight of hand. Several allowances have been included in the base rate of MICA paramedics and are therefore also subject to the 2.5 percent rise. A new MICA Single Responder Paramedic position has been created for senior MICA paramedics—a sop for the small number of personnel eligible for the higher grade.

The main purpose of the deal on Tuesday was to shut down the planned action by MICA workers, which threatened to disrupt and undermine the union's plans to ram through ratification of the overall August 11 agreement. As part of its strategy, the AEA has kept its members in the dark about the full text of the agreement and has worked to isolate the MICA specialists from other paramedics and ambulance workers.

Now the union will present a *fait accompli* to ratification meetings later this month. No doubt AEA leaders will declare that they have achieved the best possible agreement and tell workers that the Fair Work Australia rulings have placed them in a weak position. Already AEA members are being told that the only alternative to the present agreement is compulsory arbitration that would lead to even worse results.

In reality, the state and federal Labor governments are completely dependent on the union to contain the angry opposition of ambulance workers over their deteriorating pay and conditions. As for Fair Work Australia, it only has any clout because the unions have totally accommodated themselves to the body and its draconian powers and act as industrial policemen for its rulings.

MICA workers must take matters into their own hands. They should reject the union's sell-out deal and campaign for independent meetings of all ambulance

workers. Such meetings should elect rank-and-file committees to wage a political and industrial campaign for their demands.

Workers should be under no illusions. Such a campaign will inevitably lead to a confrontation with the unions and the state and federal Labor governments, which will not hesitate to use the full force of the state apparatus against any independent struggle conducted by the working class.

Having bailed out the banks and sections of big business to the tune of billions of dollars, the Rudd government and its accomplices in every state are seeking to impose the full burden of the global economic crisis onto ordinary working people. The suppression of pay rises is just one aspect of the broad offensive being prepared against the social position of the working class, including the slashing of essential services such as public health and education.

MICA workers can only defend their pay and conditions by turning out to other workers in the public health sector and other services and industries who are also under attack. The working class is not responsible for the global economic crisis and should not be compelled to bail out those who are.

The only means for countering the Rudd government's agenda is to develop a broad-based and politically independent movement of working people to defend living standards and democratic rights on the basis of a socialist program. Decent pay and conditions, along with a secure job and free, high quality public health and education, should be a basic right for everyone. This requires the complete reorganisation of society from top to bottom along socialist lines to meet the social needs of ordinary people, not the profits of the corporate elite.



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