

SEP candidate for Swan campaigns at Royal Perth Hospital

Our correspondent
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Last weekend, Socialist Equality Party candidate for Swan, Joe Lopez, campaigned outside the Royal Perth Hospital (RPH), Western Australia's biggest public teaching hospital, discussing the party's program with hospital workers, patients and visitors.

Royal Perth Hospital is an 855-bed teaching hospital located on the northeastern side of the Perth CBD. It has one of the busiest accident/emergency departments in Australia and often suffers from overcrowding. It treats patients from across the metropolitan area, as well as from regional and remote areas of the geographically-large state, including many Aboriginal patients who require specialised treatment.

The public hospital system, along with the rest of the public health service in Western Australia and throughout the country, is chronically underfunded, understaffed and under-resourced. Currently, there are 16,000 people on surgery waiting lists. An Australian Medical Association of Western Australia (AMA-WA) report published earlier this year stated that the public hospital system required an extra 400 beds immediately to cope with demand.

An AMA-WA survey of 671 senior and junior doctors in February revealed that two-thirds of doctors working in the public hospital system reported that budget constraints were hampering their ability to care for patients properly.

Since 1983, the number of public hospital beds across Australia has been slashed from 74,000 to 54,000 by successive state and federal governments despite a rapidly growing and aging population.

Notwithstanding record budget surpluses in Western Australia due to the boom in minerals exports, state Labor and Liberal governments have done little to address the crisis in health care, which affects public hospitals and services such as mental health, aged care, dental health and Aboriginal health.

Lopez, a health worker, is employed at RPH's Rehabilitation Annexe at Shenton Park in Perth's western suburbs. He and other members of the SEP campaign team spoke to staff, patients and visitors about a range of issues, including health care, the impact of the state's mining boom and the political coup inside the Labor Party that ousted Kevin Rudd as prime minister.

Charlie, previously employed as a cleaner, commented: "I have been waiting for a shoulder operation at Fremantle Hospital for six months. When I rang recently to check when I would be done I was told I had to wait another two months. I am suffering in pain. I can no longer work and I am on a disability pension now. It's really wrong that lots of people have to wait for operations and that waiting lists are so long."

John, a self-employed metal trades contractor, told SEP supporters: "I am visiting RPH, as my father is being discharged today. I have seen that there are empty beds in this hospital, but there are not enough staff to work on the wards and make use of the beds. If some floors are vacant and there are not enough staff, why is that? It must be lack of funds. My father has been in and out of hospital for the last three years and I haven't seen it get any better or worse, but it should be improving."

“The mining companies are making huge profits. I actually agreed with Rudd’s mining tax. I don’t like the way Rudd was kicked out. I am not sure who I will vote for, but I think Kevin Rudd should have been allowed to stay on for three years. It was very undemocratic the way he was removed. I am not Labor or anything, but Rudd should have stayed in and if he didn’t perform then there should be a change of government.”

Christina, a registered nursing student, said: “I would like to see more workers in the hospital, more beds and more hospitals to be built. I would like to see more suburban hospitals so that people can be closer to hospitals and not have to travel from far away.”

An Aboriginal woman from Fitzroy Crossing in the remote Kimberley region of the state’s north west explained: “I am here visiting my partner who has cancer. Many people like me have to leave families and children behind and travel. We stay in hostels and have to pay for the accommodation. Some patients have no support around them on the wards.

“We need more liaison officers to help. There are some Aboriginal workers in the hospital but there needs to be more who speak the language and can explain things. Many people from [Aboriginal] communities are frightened of surgery and don’t know how to ask the doctors questions. We need better accommodation while we are down here so families can stay together while the patient is in hospital,” she said.

Gloria Cassidy, 77, explained that she still works as the secretary of the Western Australian Disabled Workers Union, which looks after industrial, legal and medical issues for disabled workers employed at sheltered workshops around Western Australia. She has been working there for 27 years.

The Disabled Workers Union of WA previously received an annual federal government grant of \$50,000, which was used to employ two staff. However, this was axed two years ago by current Parliamentary Secretary for Disability and Children’s Services Bill Shorten.

“We were only getting \$50,000 per year funding to look after all our people and that was taken away,” Cassidy said. “Shorten reckoned I wasn’t doing enough advocacy for the disabled and went ahead and cut our funding. It’s just ridiculous.”

Julie, a registered nurse working in the mental health ward at RPH, commented on the crisis in mental health and the lack of funding: “What I’m seeing in my work is the huge stigma associated with mental illness. I think there needs to be more and more exposure of mental illness to the public. It’s not a vote winner. I have also worked in prisons as a nurse and a lot of the mentally ill are ending up in prison. I think it’s appalling that there is not more housing for the mentally ill.”

Nicole, an administration officer, was visiting her mother who has leukaemia. She commented: “The health system needs to be improved. My family were always Labor but we don’t trust Gillard or Tony Abbott. We feel that Western Australia is getting robbed, and that the profits from mining are not being used properly and that we, the people, miss out.

“People should not have to wait for a bed. My mother has had to come back for treatment and she has had to wait for two weeks for a bed. I even asked the hospital if I re-mortgaged my house could I go private and not have to wait for a bed for my mother. They said no, we have no choice. It’s wrong that the health system and the government are playing with people’s lives. I know other people have to wait for beds in the burns unit and cancer units. It’s not the fault of the people working in RPH, such as the doctors, it’s the federal government that needs to do something.”

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