

Australian mental health workers maintain bans over wages and conditions

Susan Allan**19 January 2012**

Public sector mental health workers in Victoria have maintained work bans and conducted stoppages as part of Health and Community Services Union (HACSU) negotiations with the state Liberal government for a new three-year enterprise bargaining agreement.

Those involved include mental health clinicians, nurses, and administrative and support staff employed in psychiatric facilities. HACSU's demands include a 16 percent wage rise over three years—8 percent in the first year, then 4 percent in each of the two following years—as well as improved staffing levels.

Currently, clinicians working in mental health community centres have no maximum number of cases. Some are forced to work with more than 40 clients at a time. They want a weekly maximum of 20 hours of clinical contact time. Mental health workers also want mandated staffing profiles to ensure that different facilities have adequate professional help to meet the complex needs of their clients.

The state government of Premier Ted Baillieu has issued a series of demands for “shift-flexibility,” management-directed “staff relocations” and a reduction in minimum staffing profiles. It is also attempting to impose a 2.5 percent annual wage deal—a significant real pay cut—in line with its regressive wage ceiling for all public sector workers. Throughout Australia, austerity measures are being stepped up in response to the demands of the financial markets to match those being imposed in Europe and the US.

Mental health services are already in profound crisis,

following decades of chronic underfunding by Liberal and Labor governments at both state and federal levels. In the early 1990s, under the banner of “deinstitutionalisation” and “modernisation,” psychiatric hospitals were shut down in favour of “community based” care. Governments then failed to provide the funding for the array of resources and professional expertise that was required to deal with the hospital closures as well as the continued increase in mental health problems in society.

As a result, mental health workers and facilities are stretched to breaking point, with staff shortages and heavy workloads creating an unsafe working environment. Physical assaults in the workplace are increasing in frequency, and stress levels have created a staff retention crisis. Patients’ lives have also been placed at risk as a result of government policy. The *Age* newspaper last year reported that 975 people under the care of Victoria’s mental health system died “unnatural, unexpected or violent deaths” between 2006 and 2010, including dozens who died while in psychiatric wards.

As in the case of other public sector workers, the Baillieu government has indicated that it has no intention of making any concessions to mental health workers. Negotiations with HACSU have been taking place behind closed doors for several months. The union’s campaign is designed to let off steam as it prepares to sell-out the dispute.

Last November, after 96 percent of the union’s members voted for industrial action, mental health workers began a series of work bans on non-clinical administrative duties. They also held several two-hour

stoppages and protested outside public hospitals. On December 7, about 500 mental health workers, including contingents from both rural and city centres, held a mass meeting in Melbourne and agreed to impose further limited bans, related to patient admissions and discharges.

HACSU and other unions have deliberately restricted any campaign, using the federal Gillard Labor government's Fair Work Australia legislation, which outlaws virtually all forms of industrial action. No unified action by health workers, let alone public sector workers more broadly, has been taken. As a result, the government, assisted by the unions, has been able to pick off different sections of workers.

The Health Services Union, representing poorly paid hospital staff, including orderlies and kitchen staff, recently imposed a sell-out agreement involving a 2.5 percent wage settlement. The Community and Public Sector Union has welcomed the pending arbitration of a new enterprise agreement for its members by the Fair Work industrial tribunal, making clear it will do nothing to oppose the government's decision to eliminate 3,600 public service jobs, representing 10 percent of the entire workforce.

Last November, the Australian Nurses Federation (ANF) betrayed the determined struggle waged by public hospital nurses and midwives by shutting down industrial action, in flagrant violation of the nurses' decision to maintain their action in defiance of a ban imposed by Fair Work Australia. The nurses' dispute remains unresolved. The government has refused to make any concessions whatsoever, while the ANF has sowed divisions and demoralisation. The latest ANF stunt is to threaten a "mass resignation" of nurses.

At the same time, the unions are actively promoting the Labor Party. Following the mental health workers' mass meeting last month, HACSU organised a march to the state parliament where workers were addressed by Labor's state opposition leader, Daniel Andrews, who postured as an opponent of Baillieu's agenda. In reality, there are no real policy differences between the major parties on the need for spending cuts. Andrews served as health minister under the previous Brumby

Labor government, presiding over funding shortfalls that sent spending on mental health services in Victoria plummeting to the second lowest of Australia's states and territories.

Mental health workers must take the campaign out of HACSU's hands. New organisations of struggle must be built, including rank and file committees. The overwhelming public support for the struggle and self-sacrifice of health workers must be transformed into an industrial and political campaign against the Baillieu and Gillard governments, unifying every layer of the working class whose jobs, wages, and conditions are being undermined. Such a campaign can be waged only on the basis of a socialist perspective to reorganise society to meet the pressing needs of working people, rather than the profits of a tiny wealthy elite. Above all, it requires a fight for a workers' government to implement socialist policies, including free and high quality health care.



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