Australia: Victorian hospital workers speak on government cuts

Our reporters
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The *World Socialist Web Site* recently spoke with Victorian nurses and other public hospital workers, including cleaners, personal care assistants and kitchen workers, about the government's assault on their pay and working conditions.

Nurses in the Australian Nursing Federation (ANF) enforced limited bed closures between November 12 and 25 against the plan of the state Liberal government of Ted Baillieu to slash hospital spending by emasculating current compulsory nurse-to-patient staffing ratios and by introducing lower-paid nursing assistants.

The government is also determined to enforce its public sector wage ceiling of 2.5 percent—a real wage cut. Baillieu has been backed at every step by the federal Labor government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard, whose industrial relations body, Fair Work Australia, has banned the nurses' industrial action.

The coordinated attack on the nurses is part of a wider drive against public sector workers nationally being spearheaded by the Gillard government, in line with the pro-business austerity measures implemented in the US, Europe and internationally.

The ANF and the Health Services Union (HSU), which covers other hospital workers, are striving to enforce the government's agenda. The ANF backed the Fair Work order, shutting down the nurses' industrial action and isolating their campaign. Union leaders subsequently announced they would consider threatening Baillieu with mass resignations of nurses—a cynical stunt aimed at demoralising and dividing nurses.

Meanwhile, the HSU last month rammed through a sell-out agreement with the state government, imposing a nominal wage increase of just 2.5 percent. The union bureaucracy ensured that there was no coordinated struggle between the hospital workers and the nurses, or involving other public sector workers facing similar attacks, including mental health workers, teachers, and public servants, whose ranks are to be decimated through the destruction of 3,600 jobs.

Negotiations between the ANF and the state government are continuing, while the union has announced that members' meetings to discuss the resignation threat will be held in hospitals until at least February 23.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with a male nurse, originally from the United States, who has 30 years' experience.

"I didn't like it when our [union] secretary called off the industrial action," he said. "There was a mass meeting that voted to start the work to rule, but it was called off by executive decision. Where is the collective in that? If we resign en masse we will lose this fight. Resigning en masse will hand it back to the government." He continued: "My theory is the executive of the ANF has colluded with the Health Department. They would have said: 'We're going to huff and puff, make waves, but really we'll agree to disagree.' Really trade unions are dead and buried. My grandfather fought for the eight hour day. Where has that gone?"

Another nurse from Geelong, a port city south-west of Melbourne, explained that she and her husband are enrolled in a two-year full-time university course to become Registered Nurses (RN), while they also work as Enrolled Nurses (EN). Enrolled nurses require a lesser vocational qualification.

"The university degree is supposed to give you more scope in your work options," she explained. "But now, why bother? The government is putting untrained people in nursing roles anyway to get them in for cheaper. A first year

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EN gets $35,000... The government also wants to bring in personal care assistants [PCAs] with only six weeks' training into nursing roles. PCAs already work in aged care and hospitals, but they assist only under supervision. It is extra work for the nurses which they don't get paid for. They've done this already in England—from what co-workers have told me, it is disastrous."

She continued: "We're both doing it hard. I work casually at the Port Phillip prison for 30 hours per week, trying to squeeze a full-time uni course in at the same time. This will cost us both $25,000 in fees. So we will start in our 40s with $50,000 in university debt, plus our mortgage, plus two teenagers. Next year the university course will include 12 weeks of unpaid hospital placement. We have both already used up our annual leave, so now we're just working extra to save a bit of cash to last us over that time."

A hospital cleaner spoke to the WSWS about the recent HSU agreement, which includes a wage increase of just 2.5 percent, or $25 per week, whichever is greater. "An increase of $25 per week is actually nothing," he declared. "After tax it's about $18 per week. What do you get with that in 2011?"

He continued: "We haven't had a joint struggle with nurses for years and years. I've got no idea why—it would have been a good strategy. I'm the hospital delegate to the HSU. I spoke to the union organiser here and told him that 2.5 percent wasn't enough, and he said, 'it's the best I can do.' You have to say, the union leaders are not doing their best. They're already getting enough money. Our officials make on average $200,000; I know because I've seen it."

Commenting on the Labor government's industrial relations body, he said: "Fair Work Australia is crap. When the IR [industrial relations] laws were introduced by [former Liberal Prime Minister] John Howard, Labor said they would get rid of it. Labor took over and the IR law was abolished, but when they abolished the IR laws there was a lot of rules in there that weren't taken out at all. Now we cannot afford to go on strike. Because if you do you either get docked or fined for illegal action—and not only you but the organisation you belong to. It's crap, because they're taking out your rights."

Another cleaner, originally from Yugoslavia and who now works at the Royal Melbourne Hospital, told the WSWS: "I know ten people who resigned from the union during and after our enterprise agreement. The deal was an absolute insult, to me and to the working class. I have been working for 18 years and I make a miserable $17.60 per hour—and we get a 2.5 percent pay increase!"

She continued: "Under both Labor and Liberal the laws have gotten worse and worse for the working class. Fair Work Australia is worse than under Howard. The union never protects us. If we call them because we are being harassed, they may come to the hospital a few weeks or a month later... The hospitals promote divisions between health workers, and the unions never organise jointly. It's time to say, enough is enough! Cleaners, nurses, midwives, storepersons, technicians—everyone has to organise together."

A personal care assistant at the Royal Women's Hospital told the WSWS: "What the government is doing will be dangerous for patients—getting rid of ratios and bringing in inexperienced staff. The nurses I work with have done four years of study and then do further training to keep up to date. I'd hate if my relatives were in there with just health assistants, especially in emergency... It's all about money. I worked in aged care for 20 years and saw so much cost-cutting that I had to get out. It got to the point where they were saying, 'we need to spend $3.20 per patient per day on food'."

A psychiatric nurse at the Royal Melbourne Hospital with 20 years' experience explained: "Under the enterprise bargaining system, every time an agreement was made, it was always on the basis of us giving something up. Over years now, all the so-called pay increases were just inflation-based, and we always had to give something up, like we gave up our RDOs [rostered days off], meal allowances—small deals that have led to our appalling conditions."

He noted: "By calling on nurses to resign, the ANF just gives the government what it wants. It will deliver a perfect measure to cut staffing and costs, and re-employ nurses on new terms."

The authors recommend:

Australian nurses' union announces "mass resignation" stunt
[19 December 2011]

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