

Australia: Victorian paramedics protest over poor conditions

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About 100 paramedics rallied last week to support 20 colleagues at the Sunshine ambulance depot, in Melbourne's western suburbs, protesting against unsafe working conditions in the 40-year-old building. The dispute has become a focal point for more wide-ranging anger and concern among paramedics.

Victorian paramedics are particularly poorly paid, earning up to \$20,000 a year less than their fellow workers in several other states. Yet they are faced with demands for increased productivity offsets, including cuts to shift breaks, sick leave and annual leave, in enterprise bargaining negotiations.

Amid declining revenues because of Australia's intensifying economic slump, the state Liberal government of Premier Ted Baillieu is seeking to drive down public health spending. It is also under mounting fiscal pressure from the federal Labor government, whose "health reform" program requires relentless cost-cutting.

As a result, the paramedics' employer Ambulance Victoria (AV) has imposed a 2.5 percent annual pay rise ceiling, with productivity offsets—in effect, a real wage cut combined with further attacks on working conditions. The state government has applied this limit to all public sector wage claims, including nurses and teachers, with only police exempted.

At Sunshine, the depot is dilapidated. There are no bedrooms, only a bed in a lounge and one in a tiny office. This means that crews unable to drive home safely after overtime, which often involves a 15-hour shift, have nowhere quiet to sleep.

Two of the four garage doors at the station are fused shut and ambulances have to reverse out. There are also structural problems with the building, and asbestos is present. A section of the roof recently caved in. Security is questionable after a break-in on Boxing

Day.

An engineer's report 12 months ago recommended the building be demolished and rebuilt. A WorkSafe report in July noted water damage, problems with car park security and lack of bedroom facilities. Both reports were ignored.

After discussions with management proved fruitless, the Sunshine crews voted to refuse to work out of the building any longer, and moved to the neighbouring St Albans depot. At last week's rally, paramedics from other depots in the western region, from the northern suburbs and Geelong, 80 kilometres away, applauded their stand.

The rally, however, was organised by the Ambulance Employees Association, the trade union that covers ambulance crews, which sought to divert the mounting discontent among the paramedics back behind the Labor Party. The protest was addressed by state Labor opposition health spokesman Gavin Jennings, who claimed the problem was caused just by the Baillieu government.

In fact, chronic underfunding of the Ambulance Service has been a long-term feature under Labor and Liberal governments alike.

During 2009, under the former state Labor government, Victorian paramedics tried to take industrial action during enterprise agreement negotiations. The federal Labor government's Fair Work Australia (FWA) industrial tribunal quickly declared the action illegal. Shortly afterward, the union reached a sell-out deal with the state government based on a 2.5 percent pay agreement, imposing more onerous shift times, lower overtime payments and other productivity speed-ups.

Mobile Intensive Care (MICA) paramedics attempted to take further action through a mass resignation from

their positions, only to be threatened with crippling fines when FWA ruled this action illegal as well.

Three years on, the union's current enterprise bargaining agreement (EBA) negotiations are being held under conditions of growing dissatisfaction and frustration among paramedics.

A State Services Authority survey of 800 paramedics, leaked to the media in December, showed that one third of them are looking for work elsewhere and almost two thirds are thinking of leaving. More than half reported being stressed, and 34 percent said they had been bullied. Half were not confident that Ambulance Victoria would deal promptly with grievances, 80 percent were dissatisfied with their work-life balance, and only a quarter believed AV was committed to developing its employees.

The "ramping" or banking up of ambulances at hospitals, because of shortages of emergency beds, has become a major issue. Patient transfer times have increased at each of Melbourne's 22 major hospitals between 2009-10 and 2011-12, in some cases by more than threefold, tying up ambulance crews overall for almost 10,000 hours each month. This is effectively cost-shifting by the cash-strapped hospitals. If the ambulance bypassed the hospital, the hospital's performance indicators would be affected and financial penalties incurred under the federal Labor government's funding regime.

A senior paramedic told the WSWs: "With 'ramping' retained, half of every shift is spent waiting in corridors. There is great frustration at the forced downtime. AV is very reluctant to deal with that. Yet, we're asked for productivity increases. Ramping saves the hospitals from going on bypass—that's a bad performance indicator for them—and there are fines involved."

His friend added: "Compared to the last EBA, a lot more people are willing to push. Those people at Sunshine are really brave. Under our employment contract, they could be terminated."

A young paramedic from Sunshine commented on the failure to replace the dilapidated building. "This is long-term neglect, and a failure to keep up with other facilities," he explained. "This is part of a wider problem in the health system. Look at the closure of a ward at Royal Melbourne Hospital—that will only make the queues worse.

"There is a big problem in lack of recognition of our skills, our workloads... There is not a lot to encourage you, other than enjoying the job. But that doesn't pay the mortgage. I'm going to leave. You have a 10-hour shift, which becomes anything from 11 hours to 16 hours with the overtime. That isn't enjoyable."

A northern suburbs paramedic commented: "The 2.5 percent that we've been offered is a pay cut. They'll always make excuses, but they show how much they really value paramedics. Health is being run on a business model. At the end of the day, it is a health service, not a health business."

Asked about Jennings, the Labor politician who addressed the rally, he replied: "I'm pretty sceptical about politicians unless they can offer a real content. I've been doing this for 10 years. It's Labor in, Liberals out, Liberals in, Labor out. But nothing has changed for the ambulance services."

A MICA paramedic commented: "I think the 2.5 percent with trade-offs stinks. They're continually asking us to do things to make them look better, like making trials of new equipment. But when it comes time for pay, there's never a mention of the 'job well done. We'll support you for these pay increases.'

"In this climate I don't know if we will get anything. I'd be prepared to strike, but then the state government will hold out the essential services act—you're threatened with jail and fines."

Asked about the federal Labor government's starving of funds to the states, he replied: "Generally I've been a Labor supporter for most of my life but it becomes a very nebulous line between the two parties. I must admit that Labor annoys me the most. The Liberals are at least open about standing for business and the rich."



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