

Australia: Protest over privatisation of hospital hydrotherapy pool

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A rally was held outside one of Sydney's major hospitals, the Prince of Wales, last Monday to protest against the planned privatisation of the hospital's hydrotherapy pool. The sell-off is a direct result of deep healthcare cuts by the state and federal governments, which are forcing public hospitals to slash spending and find new revenue sources, at the expense of patients.

The protest was joined by patients who face large fee hikes to use the pool, and hospital workers who face job losses. Pensioners and people on low incomes will be the hardest hit. At present it costs as little as \$6 per visit to use the pool but according to the Health Services Union (HSU) this could rise as high as \$70-\$78, which is the standard market range. Up to 2,000 people a month use the hydrotherapy pool.

Hydrotherapy is used to treat a variety of injuries and diseases that inhibit motion or cause pain. Patients include those with arthritis, spinal problems or post-polio syndrome.

Maria Civicl explained to WSWs reporters the importance of the pool. "I have an operation on my knee and other issues. If I don't have access to the pool, then I won't recover properly because you can't do proper exercise out of the pool. I've heard they want to charge \$85. I'm only a pensioner and I need to use it twice a week. I can't afford that."

A Prince of Wales physiotherapy worker said redundancies would result. "The cutbacks taking place will have an impact on our jobs. The last [state government] budget brought down a \$90 million cut to staffing over three years. That works out to about \$2 million to \$3 million at Prince of Wales, so we have to reduce our staffing budget by that much. We've been told to reduce our budget by \$250,000 already."

The staff member explained that the hydrotherapy

pool sell-off was part of a wider process of privatisation, out-sourcing and contracting out. "We're seeing the same sort of thing in a whole range of areas," he said. "Some transport is already contracted out to private operators. They are looking at contracting out more. Other out-patient services are also being looked at."

The rally was relatively small, yet both HSU state secretary Gerard Hayes and Unions New South Wales secretary Mark Lennon felt obliged to attend. The presence of such senior officials reveals anxiety within the union hierarchy about the potential development of independent working class struggles against the austerity program and cost-cutting pro-market "reforms" being implemented by the state and federal governments.

Hayes tried to blame the cuts on state government policy, telling the rally that, "the [state] government has taken a position of putting infrastructure forward in this state and they do that by taking away health services." This amounts to a cynical cover-up. Premier Barry O'Farrell's government last year slashed \$3 billion from the state health budget over four years, because of sharp falls in tax revenues and cuts inflicted by the federal Labor government.

While Hayes directed his rhetoric against O'Farrell's Liberal government, he claimed that the union's campaign would be directed to Canberra as well. Hayes, who is the brother of a federal Labor MP, certainly has no intention of fighting the Gillard government. Rather, his pitch was an attempt to distance the union from its long-standing affiliation to the Labor Party. "This is not a party or political issue," he told the rally.

Lennon dropped his calls at previous public sector rallies for the re-election of a state Labor government,

saying only: “This is going to be a very tough year with cuts coming left, right and centre.” Opposed to any broad campaign to fight the cutbacks, he simply declared that if savings had to be made, “find them elsewhere.”

Clearly, it is becoming more difficult for the unions to present Labor as a “lesser evil” to the Liberals, given the hostility among working people to the pro-business program of the Gillard government, including its welfare and other spending cuts.

The HSU has its own reasons for distancing itself from the Labor Party. Two long-time HSU national leaders—ex-Labor MP Craig Thomson and former Labor Party national president Michael Williamson—have been embroiled in a lurid corruption scandals, resulting in thousands of health workers quitting the union.

When Hayes, a protégé of Williamson, was elected HSU state secretary last November, he vowed not to re-affiliate the union with the Labor Party. In reality, the union remains wedded to Labor as well as to parliamentary politics. When the rally finished, the union made an appeal for attendees to sign a petition and write to members of parliament.

The Gillard government’s healthcare “reform” program ties hospital funding to “national efficiency prices”, in effect forcing hospitals to constantly cut costs for each service or procedure they deliver. This financial regime is compounding the state government cutbacks.

Local health districts across NSW are being forced to slash spending, with the largest being Sydney (\$47.7 million), South East Sydney—which covers Prince of Wales—(\$43.1 million) and Northern Sydney (\$39.5 million). Western Sydney’s Westmead Hospital has reportedly been told to find \$60 million in cuts by February. It has already reacted by closing down a popular staff cafeteria and outsourcing its services.

Potentially, the deterioration in services has life-threatening consequences. The NSW auditor reported in December an increase in the length of time being taken by people to receive medical attention at hospitals. At least 1 in 3 ambulances have crews waiting over 30 minutes for their patients to be placed in a bed. Ambulance NSW explained that average ambulance response times had risen from 10.7 to 10.9 minutes, citing higher demand and longer hospital

waiting times. Under the previous state Labor government, the figure had already risen from 9.8 minutes in 2005-06.

Similar cuts are taking place across the country, including in Victoria where 50 jobs are being axed from the new Royal Children’s Hospital.

Labor’s national health “reform” agenda is not only leading to job losses and hospital cutbacks, but the closure or privatisation of essential community and medical services, exemplified by the sell-off of the Prince of Wales hydrotherapy pool.



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