

Australia: Labor Party promoted at protest against Medicare cuts

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Around 1,000 people attended a rally in Sydney last Saturday, protesting against suggestions that the Liberal-National government is preparing to introduce an upfront “co-payment” for a visit to a doctor. General practitioner consultations are currently covered by the Medicare public health scheme, and any shift toward a “user pays” model will pave the way to the outright abolition of Medicare.

The political purpose of the demonstration, however, was to promote the fraudulent claim that the Labor Party represents an alternative to the government’s austerity and privatisation agenda. Those who organised the protest, including the pseudo-left organisations such as Socialist Alternative, Solidarity and Socialist Alliance, aim to block any independent movement of workers and young people in defence of their interests, and channel opposition behind the Labor Party, Greens and trade unions.

The rally was largely comprised of official union contingents, led by senior bureaucrats. Members of Young Labor, the organisation for aspiring parliamentary and trade union careerists, were also prominent, while Labor Party staff members served as protest marshals.

Co-chairing the rally was Freya Bunday, a leading member of Solidarity, an organisation affiliated to the British Socialist Workers Party. After declaring that “the union movement, healthcare sector, community organisations, campuses, and religious organisations [have] all come out in strong opposition” to the proposed Medicare co-payment, Bunday added: “[I]t’s been very, very positive that both the Greens, who we’ll hear from subsequently, and the Australian Labor Party have had such a vocal opposition to this proposal.”

She called on people to welcome Tanya Plibersek,

Labor’s deputy leader and the previous Labor government’s health minister.

Plibersek used the platform to portray Labor as a champion of public healthcare. “When I was health minister, we got bulk billing rates up to 82 percent, the highest rate ever in Australian history,” she declared. “But more than that we looked at preventative health, how to keep people healthy...”

In reality, the previous Labor government, under both prime ministers Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard, carried out significant real cuts to public health care funding, leading to the closure of hundreds of hospital beds throughout the country.

The day before the rally, the Australian Medical Association (AMA) released a report that documented the sharp decline. On a per capita basis, the number of available beds plunged by 43 percent over the past 20 years. In 2012–13, under the Labor government, only 68 percent of emergency department patients requiring urgent attention were seen within the recommended half an hour. During Labor’s term in office, between 2007–2008 and 2012–2013, the national median waiting time for elective surgery increased from 34 to 36 days.

Plibersek listed the cuts to the public sector and healthcare being carried out by state Liberal governments in Victoria, Queensland and New South Wales. She omitted any mention of the similar measures by Labor governments in Tasmania and South Australia.

Greens Senator Richard Di Natale, his party’s health spokesman, also spoke. He whitewashed the systematic degradation of the public healthcare system in Australia under successive Liberal and Labor governments, declaring the country’s system was “the envy of every country in the world.”

The Greens propped up the previous minority Labor government and bear responsibility for its attacks on public health care.

Di Natale added: “We want a health system that says it doesn’t matter whether you come from the North Shore or Western Sydney, it doesn’t matter whether you live in Toorak or Broadmeadows, you’ll get access to decent healthcare.”

These remarks, referring to some of the wealthiest and poorest areas of Sydney and Melbourne, implied that there is equal access to healthcare in Australia. In reality, Medicare has been reduced to an underfunded safety net system, with billions of dollars in public funds funnelled to the private health sector every year via private health insurance subsidies. The wealthy can afford the best treatment money can buy, while the working class and poor often receive sub-standard care and are placed on long hospital waiting lists.

Senior union officials, including Mark Lennon, the secretary of Unions NSW, Brett Holmes, secretary of the NSW Nurses and Midwives Association and Gerard Hayes, assistant secretary of the NSW Health Services Union, struck a similar upbeat chord to Plibersek and Di Natale.

Lennon noted that the re-establishment of Medicare was associated with the Accords between big business, the unions and the government under the 1983–1996 Hawke and Keating Labor governments. The bureaucrat hailed the Accords, under which the working class was subjected to an unprecedented assault that involved the destruction of entire sections of the industry, the loss of tens of thousands of jobs, and a transfer of vast wealth from the bottom to the top of society.

Solidarity’s Freya Bunday concluded the rally on a politically duplicitous note, stating that “unfortunately” the “last government” had also carried through cuts to social spending, including by forcing some 100,000 single parents onto poverty-level unemployment allowances. No doubt concerned not to offend the Labor MPs and union officials, she failed to mention that the Greens-backed Labor government was responsible for this measure.

The pseudo-left organisations are implacably hostile to any fight for a socialist perspective in the working class. They represent and articulate the interests of an affluent section of the upper middle-class, increasingly

integrated into the union bureaucracies and well connected with sections of the Labor Party and Greens.

Solidarity distributed a statement at the rally calling for a revival of the “Your Rights at Work” campaign that the unions developed in 2007 to channel working class anger against “WorkChoices” industrial laws behind the campaign to elect the Labor Party to office. That campaign was used by the entire pseudo-left fraternity to promote the lie that a Labor government would be a “lesser evil.”

At last September’s election, six years after Labor took office, these forces again insisted that the decisive issue facing working people was to ensure that Labor was re-elected and the Liberal-National Coalition defeated.

Now the pseudo-lefts are mobilising in an attempt to prevent the working class from making a political break with the Labor Party, and launching an independent political struggle against the deeper austerity cuts that are supported by the entire political establishment, including Labor, the Liberals, and the Greens. They calculate that the sweeping cuts to social spending expected to be included in the Abbott government’s May budget will provoke opposition, and they are anxious to head off and politically neuter anti-austerity sentiment.



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