

# Australia: Large protest against Wyong hospital privatisation

John Mackay  
19 October 2016

An estimated 2,000 people attended a rally at Wyong on the Central Coast of New South Wales (NSW) last Sunday called by UnionsNSW ostensibly in opposition to the Liberal state government's attacks on healthcare and its plans to privatise the local hospital.

While the attendance expressed widespread anger over the privatisation, UnionsNSW and associated health unions organised the protest to promote the fraud that a Labor government would reverse the decades-long assault on healthcare that has been prosecuted by Liberal and Labor governments alike.

The local Wyong hospital, which provides services for thousands across the mainly working class area, is one of five large regional hospitals that the state government announced in September are to be handed over to private corporations via tender. The others in the government's cross hairs are in Maitland, Shellharbour, Goulburn and Bowral.

As with the privatisation of other state assets, the sell-off of regional hospitals will lead to the destruction of basic services, along with the jobs and working conditions of thousands of nurses and other healthcare workers. It will also establish a model for the wholesale transfer of healthcare services to the private sector via "public-private partnerships" (PPP) and other pro-business schemes.

Like other union-organised protests over privatisation, the rally at Wyong was called with the aim of promoting the fraud that the election of a Labor government would protect public health. At the same time, the union bureaucracy is hoping to use public anger as a lever to convince the government to use the unions' services to deliver its required budget cuts.

This was evident in speeches delivered by union officials and Labor MPs. One after the other, they declared that the purpose of the rally "was to send a

strong message to the government," while covering up the record of Labor, at state and federal levels, in privatising public assets and slashing healthcare spending.

Health Services Union NSW secretary Gerard Hayes bemoaned the fact that the state Liberal government of Premier Mike Baird had not consulted the unions on the proposal before its announcement. "The way the government had gone about this proposal wasn't good enough," Hayes declared.

NSW Nursing Association general secretary Brett Holmes accused the government of carrying out the "Americanisation" of the healthcare system, implying that their agenda was solely a product of a conservative ideology.

In reality, privatisation and the gutting of health funding has been an ongoing process under successive governments, Labor and Liberal, in line with the demands of the financial and corporate elite for new sources of profit.

Holmes did not mention that it was the last state Labor government that privatised services at Sydney's Royal North Shore hospital, under a deal struck in 2007 with the consortium InfraShore, which was backed by the Royal Bank of Scotland.

He was also silent on Labor's abandonment of previous promises to oppose or reverse the federal Liberal-National government's budget measures, totalling an estimated \$33 billion in cuts over the next four years, as well as hospital funding cutbacks of \$57 billion over 10 years.

Holmes condemned the Liberal government for its current moves to privatise the state's electricity distribution network. However, the campaign to sell off NSW power assets was begun by former state Labor governments.

Forced in the face of widespread opposition to abandon its plan to privatise the state's entire power network, Labor, under Premier Kristina Keneally, pushed through legislation on the eve of the 2011 state election enabling the sale of the state's electricity retail companies. This opened the way for the incoming Liberal government to finish the job.

Holmes ended by calling on those in attendance to stay committed "to taking this right up to the next state election and to kicking out Baird and his government," declaring "this is the only way of turning this around."

He was followed by Labor MP for Wyong, David Harris, and two other Central Coast state MPs who repeated the claim that Labor is opposed to privatisation and to assert that it "will always stand up for public health services."

Nothing could be further from the truth. In July last year, NSW Labor leader Luke Foley made clear his support for the privatisation, declaring in a budget reply speech that the "private and not-for-profit sectors should play a significant role in the delivery of our public services." Foley later told a Labor Party meeting that "Labor does not exist to promote state ownership."

A Socialist Equality Party (SEP) campaign team distributed hundreds of leaflets at the rally exposing the role of Labor and the unions. SEP members and supporters explained to those in attendance that the defence of healthcare could only be taken forward through an independent political movement of the working class, based on the fight for a workers government implementing socialist policies, including the provision of billions of dollars for a free, high-quality, publicly-owned health system.

Reporters from the WSWS spoke to a number of workers and young people at the rally.

**Danielle**, a mother and local resident, said she was "very sad to see the cutting of funding to social services. Privatisation is only for the people with money, not for the low income earner or people on carers or disability support pensions." She noted that the health care system was already in crisis, commenting, "When I had my eldest child two years ago there were people in hospital hallways, pregnant. People in store rooms. For a developed nation we still have a long way to go."

Danielle made the connection between the cutting of social services and the billions of dollars allocated to

the military. "I think we are putting so much into war, submarines and fighter jets. These ridiculous claims about fighting terrorism. I think we need to put money into the health system," she said.

**Cecile**, who works with the homeless, said the proposed privatisation was "an absolute disgrace. This is an area with many disadvantaged people and with high levels of unemployment. These are people who will be badly affected. It will mean only the better off will be able to afford treatment while ordinary people will not be able to afford any."

"It is hard getting any accommodation if you are unemployed or in low paid employment. Private rentals are high so many people are not able to afford them. If the public hospitals are privatised on top of all this the homeless will not be able to get any health care or decent medical treatment either."

**Graham**, an unemployed dock worker, commented on the Labor Party's privatisation of disability services under the National Disability Insurance Scheme, introduced by the previous federal Labor government in July 2013.

"It's like when they closed down the [mental health] facility on the Hawkesbury River and they just put the people out on the street. It was wrong and look at what has come up about mental health now." The facility, a residential care centre for men and women with intellectual disabilities, was closed by the NSW Labor government in 2010.

Graham said that "privatisation will push the working class down further than they already are. We are already being squeezed harder and harder all the time by the rich."



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**