

Australia: Rally against Shellharbour hospital privatisation

Our reporters

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Over 500 people attended a protest in the town of Shellharbour on the New South Wales' (NSW) South Coast on Sunday, supposedly called by Unions NSW and associated health unions to oppose the state government's plans to privatise the local hospital and four others in regional areas.

The attendance at the rally reflected widespread anger over the latest move in the decades-long gutting of the public healthcare system by state and federal governments, Liberal and Labor alike.

However, the aim of the unions that organised this and other protests was to promote the fraud that Labor, a central architect of privatisation and funding cuts to health, would reverse the attacks of the state Liberal government. The featured speaker was NSW Labor leader Luke Foley and the protest doubled as a campaign rally for Labor's bid to win the nearby seat of Wollongong in a state by-election next weekend.

The NSW Liberal government first unveiled plans to privatise five regional hospitals in Shellharbour, Maitland, Goulburn, Bowral and Wyong late last year.

They are to be run as "public-private partnerships," involving the outsourcing of public health care to private businesses, whose interest is to minimize costs by slashing services, especially for those who do not have private health insurance. The rate of private health coverage in the area is just 26 percent. People in palliative care, along with other vulnerable patients, will be forced into the new hospital, amid fears that appropriate specialized care will not be available. According to the union, 70 jobs are slated to be axed from the government-funded Illawarra Women's Service.

Sunday's protest was chaired by Unions NSW secretary Michael Morey. The tone was set by Dr Tony Sara, president of the Australian Salaried Medical

Officers Association, who proclaimed that Australia's crisis-ridden public healthcare system was "the envy of the world."

In reality, hospitals, ambulances and health clinics are chronically under-funded. Doctors have repeatedly spoken out against a major bed shortage in public hospitals. In the three months to September 2015, for instance, over 800 people spent more than 20 hours waiting for medical assistance in hospital emergency rooms across the state.

In March this year, doctors at Nepean hospital in Sydney's west told the media that another 140 beds were needed just to continue functioning and ensure adequate care. In September it was reported that health managers and officer workers were being forced to drive ambulances, due to a shortage of paramedics.

Sara's rosy depiction of the public health system was aimed at covering up the record of Labor and blaming the current privatisation moves on "right-wing politicians" and their ideological commitment to "neo-liberalism." In fact, the so-called "neo-liberal" assault on health care is the broader bipartisan attack by Liberal and Labor governments on the social rights of the working class across the board.

In his speech, Foley also boasted that "we have the best health system in the world in Australia." Posturing as an opponent of privatisation, he stated, "We live at a time where the government of this state thinks every public asset is there to be sold," and promised that Labor would "draw the line in the sand."

In fact, in his budget reply speech last year, Foley made explicit Labor's support for privatisation and particularly public-private partnerships, stating in parliament, "private and not-for-profit sectors should play a significant role in the delivery of our public services." In 2007, it was a state Labor government that

privatised services at Sydney's Royal North Shore Hospital.

At the federal level, it was the Rudd and Gillard Labor governments for instance, that introduced an Activity Basic Funding system for public hospitals, effectively abolishing base funding and only paying hospitals for each procedure they performed. Between 2006–07 and 2015-16, public health spending as a percentage of total government expenditure fell from 18.09 percent to 15.97 percent.

Foley declared that if the Liberal government did not back down, Labor would make hospital privatisation the centrepiece of its 2019 election campaign.

His comments recall the fraudulent campaign Labor waged in the 2015 election, when it postured as an opponent of electricity privatisation. In reality, the Liberals were continuing the agenda of the previous Labor government, which had passed legislation for the sale of the state's electricity retail business.

Morey concluded the rally by making the worthless pledge that the union's would "hold them all to account." In reality, the unions are collaborating with Labor to divert widespread hostility over the privatisations and other attacks on healthcare back into safe parliamentary channels.

In a damning self-indictment, Morey compared the current union campaign over hospital privatisation to the one at BlueScope Steel in nearby Wollongong last year. That "campaign" culminated in the Australian Workers Union, supported by Unions NSW, forcing through 500 sackings, a three-year wage freeze and the removal of longstanding working conditions, in the face of substantial opposition from workers.

Reporters from the WSWS spoke to a number of the protesters.

John, who works in the pharmaceutical sector said, "I'm dead against privatisation. It's to nobody's benefit, but those businesses that want to make a profit. There are certain responsibilities that a government has, and funding healthcare is one of them. This a critical issue, a community lives and dies by its ability to support its constituents.

"Going private is not the solution. I've worked in the private health system before, and they try to get blood out of a stone. And when it's all gone, they keep squeezing. And there are cuts. All of the people rallying here today, a good number of them might not have jobs

if this gets through. I might be one of them.

"We've been moving this way for at least two decades, maybe more. It's since the 70s that we've had this drive to privatize. There's not that great a difference between Labor and the Liberals. An area like this is on the cusp of becoming a big welfare sink. People need work, they need purpose, but there aren't jobs."

Margaret, a pensioner who lives in the area, initially said that she would support anybody who opposed privatisation. But when WSWS reporters pointed to the record of successive Labor governments, she responded, "I'm dead against what the Labor Party has done to the refugees. They're as bad as the Liberals when it comes to asylum-seekers.

"I don't agree with the cuts that have taken place to healthcare, it doesn't matter which government has carried it out. Health should be for everyone. The health system could be a lot better. We don't want to lose it to the private providers, they're looking after their shareholders, they don't care about anything else. I'm probably thinking more socialist than anything else."

She commented on the increasingly dire plight of youth in the Shellharbour and greater Wollongong region, "I think it's appalling what they're doing to young workers in this area. They're getting rid of the TAFE system, a wonderful system for kids who can't go to university and want to get vocational training. They're getting rid of all the good things we have, and giving it all to the private providers and it never works the same.

"I feel sorry for young people today. Some of them have to work three jobs. Everything's a struggle. I don't think we're getting the true figures as far as unemployment is concerned. For a lot of people there are no jobs out there. And for the pensioners, it's getting harder and harder, the bills are coming in, rates are going up and you can barely survive."



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