Australian disability workers strike against privatisation

Our reporters
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Up to 1,000 disability service workers held a one-day strike yesterday in New South Wales (NSW), Australia's most populous state, in opposition to the ongoing privatisation of the sector. Over 500 participated in a Sydney meeting, then marched to the state parliament.

The walkout was in defiance of a state Industrial Relations Commission order banning any industrial action. The ruling underscored the determination of the tribunal, following similar interventions by the federal Fair Work Commission, to criminalise virtually any political or industrial campaign against the bipartisan agenda of privatisation and attacks on workers' jobs and conditions.

The Public Service Association (PSA), however, called the limited strike and protest in a bid to divert widespread anger among disability workers behind impotent appeals to the state Liberal-National government, and to promote the opposition Labor Party.

While issuing empty denunciations of privatisation, the assorted union officials did not mention that much of the sector has already been sold-off over the past three years, with the PSA having done nothing to oppose the destruction of public disability services. Only around 6,000 workers in the sector are still employed by government departments.

Last year, for instance, the state government completed the privatisation of the Home Care Service, which provided assistance to over 50,000 disabled and elderly people, and employed 4,000 workers. The government body's role has been outsourced to Australian Unity, in a contract worth around $114 million. There are already widespread reports that some of those previously covered are not receiving any services from the privatised body.

At the Sydney meeting, PSA assistant general secretary Troy Wright all but dispensed with the fraud that the PSA opposes privatisation. His remarks largely focused on calls for the state government to increase the transfer payment for those workers being moved from the public to the private sector.

Tacitly accepting the dismantling of public services, Wright declared: "The compensation that's on offer for you to transfer to the private sector is inadequate. It's insulting because groups of workers that have been privatised in other industries have gotten far more."

Wright issued empty promises that the union would seek "a better employment guarantee" for workers set to be thrown into for-profit enterprises. Like other speakers, he issued a futile appeal for the state government to "grow a heart."

The union pushed through a motion for an "ongoing community campaign." This is to consist of nothing more than "political campaigning in marginal seats and representations to members of parliament," along with vague suggestions of limited strike-action in the future.

Chairing the rally outside parliament house, PSA representative Bronwyn Couch pointed to the union's real concern. "We are here because this government has refused to consult with your representative," she said. In other words, the union is seeking to maintain its position at the bargaining table and provide a figleaf of "consultation" as it supports the privatisation of the sector.

The keynote speaker at the rally was state Labor opposition leader Luke Foley. He unabashedly defended the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), announced by the former federal Labor government of Julia Gillard in 2012. From the outset, the NDIS was aimed at establishing a voucher-based system for disability services, and pushing those who require care into the private sector. It has been the basis for cuts to the disability sector by state Labor and Liberal-National governments across the country.

Foley echoed the fraudulent rationale for the scheme, declaring that "the fundamental premise of the national insurance disability scheme is about choice for people with disabilities, their carers and their loves ones," i.e., the "choice" to seek care from private providers. Foley recalled that the NDIS passed federal parliament with the support of the Liberal-Nationals and said disability policy "should be bipartisan."

Foley spelt out the nature of this "bipartisan" policy, stating that he does not "object to the role of non-

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government providers in disability services." He claimed that public servants in the disability sector had been "left to do it by yourselves... So, if there's more resources, more dollars, more support, more choice, that's a good thing and it will include the non-government sector."

In reality, as Foley knows, the NDIS is premised on cutting government budgets by selling off the provision of services to private businesses. Foley said some government providers should be maintained to function as "services of last resort," in other words, a small, poorly funded and run-down public complement to a largely privatised sector.

The PSA's acceptance of the pro-business drive of successive Labor and Liberal-National governments raises the necessity for workers to break with the union in order to carry out any struggle in defence of their jobs, wages, conditions and the social right of the disabled to high-quality, public services. Such a campaign must to be based on a socialist perspective and directed not just at the government but at the profit system itself.

WSWS reporters spoke to a number of workers at the protest.

Paul, a disability support worker for ten years, said: "I grew up in boy's homes in similar circumstances to a lot of the people we help, so I know what it's like to lose your sense of security. A lot of the people we look after have no security in their lives and now with the privatisation of these services, they don't know what's going to happen.

"There's been a lot of change over the past ten years, moving towards the private sector. The workforce is in complete uncertainty. People are moved around and the clients that we look after don't see the same people. The young people we deal with have a whole range of complex disabilities—they need a lot of support.

"I see people who have lived together for ten or twenty years, who are going to be broken up. Some of the older people we look after, who are in their 70s, are going to be shifted into old people's homes and discarded by an uncaring private sector.

"It's already moving ahead. They just want to have less costs to the government. It's very hard fighting it when both sides—Labor and the Liberals—are really on the same side when it comes to privatisation."

A registered nurse specialising in drug and alcohol rehabilitation commented: "Undoubtedly the NDIS is about the privatisation of the health system, especially for disability services. It's going to lead to poorer services and less qualified staff looking after the most vulnerable people in our community. I think long-term, eventually we're going to find that privatisation doesn't work. The services will be slashed, and people with disabilities will be blamed for not working."

She spoke about the changes that have already taken place in the sector, noting: "They're bringing in activities-based funding which has taken the focus from the health of the patient to cost-cutting. It's led to higher rates of incarceration and more of my patients going to prison. Staffing is being cut across the board. It should be registered nurses who have proper training caring for the disabled to manage their diseases.

"The NDIS is privatisation by stealth and its demolition by neglect. Ultimately, we're going to see these people have shorter lifespans and lower qualities of life."

Jamie said: "As far as I'm concerned, privatisation is just going to make things worse for the community. I worked in a privatised benevolent society and it doesn't do anything for people. It's all about screwing people.

"I also worked in a privatised immigration service and it was all about money. I was the first point of contact for immigrants when they came into the country. We housed them. It was privatised around 2004, when immigration contracted out services. It had a massive impact on services. The clients weren't getting what they needed and everybody was undermining each other. It became an intolerable place to work, so I left and now I'm a bartender.

"These are some of the most vulnerable people, the disabled, immigrants and the elderly. Services should be about helping people.

"It doesn't matter which party is in government, Labor or Liberal, ordinary people are going to get screwed either way. I've worked with government departments under governments of both parties and they were both as bad as each other. It used to be that white-collar people supported the Liberals, and blue-collar workers were Labor. Now all the parties are for the rich."

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