

Australian state government and health union shut down pathology strike

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The Health Services Union (HSU)—in collaboration with the Victorian state Labor government of Premier Daniel Andrews—ended an indefinite strike of around 600 pathology workers across the state late last month.

The industrial action was called to fight the poverty-level wages and poor conditions of workers employed by Dorevitch Pathology—a private operator with many government contracts—and aggressive company attacks on limited stoppages earlier in the month. Workers took part in Melbourne, regional centres and towns.

Dorevitch’s pathology workers, laboratory assistants, maintenance staff and clerics are paid as little as \$21 an hour, and have received no wage rise in a decade, since the last enterprise agreement expired in 2007. Staff work long hours in difficult and at times dangerous conditions.

The union sold out the strike on August 24, without any of its token pay demands being met. HSU officials invoked an application the previous week by the Labor government to the Fair Work Commission (FWC)—the federal industrial tribunal—to terminate the stoppage on the grounds it was “threatening patient safety and welfare.”

The move was the latest aggressive intervention by the Andrews government aimed at suppressing any industrial or political struggle against the deepening assault on workers’ jobs, wages and conditions.

Over the past 12 months, the state government has applied for the FWC to deploy draconian anti-strike provisions against power workers in Victoria’s Latrobe Valley, and employees of a major gas project off the state’s southern coast.

The HSU welcomed the government’s attack on the striking pathology workers. This week, it published a statement declaring: “Good news for Dorevitch Members: The Fair Work Commission has upheld the

State Government’s application to terminate industrial action. There is no more industrial action required. All action ceases!”

A union spokesperson described the sellout as “an act of good faith” by the union, i.e., an action on behalf of the government and the company.

The HSU rejoiced that Dorevitch would be forced to negotiate with the union over the next six weeks, and that the FWC would enforce a binding agreement if no deal could be reached.

The HSU is determined to stifle any struggle against the company’s offensive. Its real concern is to sign an agreement that preserves the union’s position at the negotiating table, where it will bargain away the jobs, wages and conditions of the workers it falsely claims to represent.

The union signed the 2004 deal, which provided for annual wage rises as low as 1.5 percent, up to 2007. Since that agreement expired, the HSU has sought to suppress widespread anger among the company’s workers, who are paid up to 17 percent below the industry standard.

The corporatised and anti-working class character of the HSU has been well-documented.

In the most glaring examples, Craig Thomson, the HSU national secretary when the Dorevitch agreement was struck in 2004, was found in 2015 to have “misspent” up to \$300,000 of union funds. Kathy Jackson, who headed the union from 2008 to 2015, was ordered by the Federal Court to pay approximately \$1.4 million in compensation for union funds she misappropriated.

These are not aberrations. Similar cases have been recorded in unions across the country. Over the past three decades, unions have become arms of company management, preoccupied with boosting profitability

while ensuring the privileges of wealthy union officials who collaborate on a daily basis with governments and the major corporations.

The union's statement touted the FWC as an independent "umpire." In reality, the tribunal was established by the previous federal Labor government, with the support of all the major unions, including the HSU, as an instrument of the corporate elite to slash wages, ban strikes and drive down costs for big business.

Over the past 12 months, the type of forced arbitration promoted by the HSU has seen the FWC endorse mass sackings of Energy Australia workers, the termination of 83 striking Anglo-American miners, and the abolition of the existing enterprise agreement at AGL's Loy Yang A power plant in the Latrobe Valley. The latter ruling allowed the company to potentially impose wage cuts of up to 50 percent and eliminate existing working conditions.

The HSU's pledges of fealty to the FWC, and appeals for a deal with Dorevitch, continue a pattern. The union was in long-standing back room negotiations with Dorevitch, while workers continued to labour without any wage rise. In the lead-up to the strike, HSU national secretary Diana Asmar said there had been "a year of negotiations in good faith by the union."

On July 31, staff voted to take one-day strike action on August 7. The stoppage was part of the union's attempt to pressure the company to strike a new deal. Despite the token character of the stoppage, Asmar reportedly said "the union held concerns about the company's ability to continue to deliver the service."

The company responded viciously by locking out 66 workers from August 7. When workers took further strike action throughout the week, the company expanded the lock-out list to 89.

According to media reports, the company also advertised online for workers to replace strikers. Workers alleged the company was flying in employees from Queensland and other states to cover for locked-out pathology staff.

The union continually sought to channel the dispute into impotent appeals to the Andrews government, helping provide it with a pretext to intervene. Pathology workers took indefinite strike action on August 18, before the union ended the stoppage on August 24.

State governments, including those led by Labor, and

the unions, have provided a corporate profit bonanza in the health sector. Over the past two decades, pathology services have been privatised, and lucrative government contracts handed to private operators. This is part of a broader process—the gutting of public healthcare by successive state and federal governments, Labor and Liberal-National alike.

Dorevitch has contracts across 32 Victorian public health facilities, including hospitals and prisons. Dorevitch is one of 10 pathology providers owned by Private Health Care. That company and its main competitor, Sonic Healthcare, reportedly control about 70 percent of the Australian pathology market. In August, Private Health Care posted a \$92 million profit for the 2016–17 financial year.



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