Steve McDowell, campaigner for Australian paramedic rights, speaks with WSWS

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When Steve McDowell, a medically retired paramedic with New South Wales Ambulance (NSWA), decided to establish an online support network to assist paramedics with mental health conditions, he was unprepared for the response.

Diagnosed with work-related post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), a condition afflicting growing numbers of paramedics and emergency workers, he had been met with an indifferent and dismissive management, forcing him to deal with his mental health crisis alone.

What he discovered in November 2015 when he established the support page, No More Neglect (NMN), was just how many of his colleagues were experiencing the same.

Steve explained to the *World Socialist Web Site*: "In 48 hours we had 2,500 members. In three weeks, there were 3,200 members. Keep in mind that NSWA has 4,000 staff—three quarters of them were now on my page."

The response highlighted what is well known by NSWA, governments both Liberal and Labor, the Health Services Union (HSU) and Australian Paramedics Association (APA): ambulance management presides over a toxic environment of bullying, harassment and intimidation of its staff.

Numerous government inquiries and medical reports have revealed that the inevitable trauma associated with an unrelenting work load of treating the consequences of social crises and tragedies—conducted over rotating 12-hour day, afternoon and night shifts, which regularly blow out—has resulted in a growing crisis of mental health among paramedics.

The reports have also exposed that it is the lack of management acknowledgement and support mechanisms that causes the most distress to staff. Paramedics suicide at a rate four times the general public, yet there are no formal debriefing or qualified support structures in place to ensure the well-being of the frontline and call centre staff.

Steve explained that in the absence of any support network in NSWA, he was inundated with phone calls and online messages from paramedics relaying their experiences and requesting his support. These included, far too regularly, that he helped to prevent suicides. His initiative was independent of management and not supported by either union.

He recounted the comments of a first-year female paramedic, who sought support from a senior manager after attending a particularly traumatic event. She reported to the *Sydney Morning Herald*: "His response to me was, 'When you get home, drink a bottle of bourbon, watch some porn and you'll be right.'" She said: "I felt from there on in, I've got to look after myself."

Steve explained: "I was touching a nerve with NSW Ambulance because they couldn't control NMN. Social media connected people across the state for the first time instantly. We started doing media (interviews) and the Commissioner at the time would write back to the [Sydney newspapers] *Telegraph* or the *Herald* and denounce what I said.

"Ironically, in his apology [issued by NSWA CEO Dominic Morgan on June 25, 2018 to all NSW paramedics for management failure to support its staff], he admitted everything I was saying for three years."

Steve noted: "It was very clear from the outset that both unions would not tolerate No More Neglect. To this day, not a mention of us, no posts on their website. I couldn't understand that. Look what we've done in three years with no structure, no unionism, no financial support?"

Significantly, he reported that there was international support for NMN. "We had global people on the No More Neglect page. At its peak, we had people from the US, Canada, New Zealand, South East Asia as well, all paramedics with identical problems. I made a speech that was posted live online by Paramedics Australasia in 2016 that was seen in 40 different countries. It's global."

Steve also spoke about the tragic suicide of Hunter region paramedic Tony Jenkins on April 9, 2018, and the campaign waged by his family for the truth about his final hours spent in a meeting with two NSWA regional managers. The meeting, to which Jenkins was summoned off-road, without notice or with a support person present, was held to accuse him of fentanyl addiction and theft. No minutes, recordings or contemporaneous notes were taken of the discussion, despite the 28-year veteran paramedic being accused of criminal acts.

To date, despite repeated demands by Sharon, Tony's widow, and his family, no evidence has been presented to substantiate these allegations. In fact, NSWA has recently had to retract assertions made in the internal Root Cause Analysis (RCA) report that Tony had brought two syringes of morphine into the

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meeting. This, they now admit, did not happen.

Steve McDowell said: “I say Tony’s (suicide) is a turning point. Sharon and the girls have been so vocal. I have been vocal, but I haven’t lost my loved one to suicide. When Kim Jenkins (Tony’s daughter) was on the ABC’s ‘QandA’ [a weekly live panel discussion program] and when Sharon and the girls were on ‘7.30’ [a nightly current affairs program], I think they started to rally people around.

“There is a term, ‘crazy Steve follower.’ It is used because I had mental health issues. As much as it is offensive, it is their only defence. They can’t call Sharon ‘crazy.’ She has lost her husband and she won’t give up. I think it is a turning point and unfortunately, through tragedy, it was going to take something like this to really make a big dent in this organisation.”

WSWS asked Steve about his video posted on his Facebook page, “No More Neglect - Justice for Tony,” in which he calls for a Royal Commission into the culture in NSW Ambulance. In the video, he made a connection between the fight for answers regarding Tony Jenkins’ suicide and the persecution of Australian journalist, Julian Assange, for exposing the war crimes of US imperialism.

Steve explained: “The reason I put him in the video was because we are exposing things that people don’t want to talk about, the truth. You can’t lie about the truth. I can prove the things we’re talking about, and Assange can prove it, obviously. I put him there because the quote underneath his picture was ‘If I am lying why are they trying so hard to silence me.’

“I’m telling the truth. Why are you trying to silence me? Because I am telling the truth. If I wasn’t, you wouldn’t worry about me. That’s why I got all the bullies and trolls going after me, because they knew it was true. I’d hit a nerve.”

The video also reported on the “People Matters 2018” NSW Public Sector Employee Survey. In the NSW Ambulance section of the survey, it reported that less than a quarter of the employees questioned felt NSWA management would listen or act on the results of the survey and only 30 percent agreed that the organisation is committed to developing its employees.

In the light of such a damning survey result, Steve was asked if, under these conditions, paramedics have turned to the unions.

He answered: “No, they don’t trust the unions. I joined the HSU [Health Services Union] when I started my job. Twelve months later, I quit and saved myself $500 a year, because they did nothing for me and I witnessed them doing nothing for anyone else.

“APA [Australian Paramedics Association] came along in 2009, and I met with them recently. We’re trying to get their support and join forces. They’re run by paramedics for paramedics. But I’ll be honest. Even with them, I can see signs of what happened and has historically been the case with HSU, where it is undeniable there are some things that you can’t explain.

“For example, I feel, they have not in any way, shape or form supported Sharon Jenkins and her family. Not a word. I play that in my mind, logically, why wouldn’t they support her? What have they got to hide or are they backing Ambulance?

“The well known ‘rule’ is that the PSCU (Professional Standards and Conduct Unit) is there for the management, and the unions are there for the staff. But when the unions aren’t there for the staff, who is there for them?”

With the burnout rate for paramedics now estimated at just five years, Steve explained that the lack of support for NSWA staff will mean that longer-serving paramedics will increasingly be forced out of the service.

“NSWA are waiting for them to move on, to bring in the university grads and cycle them through five years at a time and eventually these [older] guys will be sunsetted and they will shut up. I don’t think you will see 30-year veterans any more. Firstly, because of the awareness of mental health. The number of jobs paramedics have to attend is now ridiculous, causing burnout.

“The service doesn’t want you to be there anyway because you start to realise their system and you start talking about it. The cost of long service and finances will stop them wanting those people. Thirty-year veterans like Tony won’t exist in a decade, I don’t think. And the sad part about it for the public is that all that knowledge and experience is lost and NSWA don’t seem to care.”

Steve concluded: “The thing is, if NSWA treated their staff the way their staff treat the public, there would be no issue.”

The authors also recommend:

NSW Ambulance makes stunning reversal of allegation against Australian paramedic Tony Jenkins
[27 December 2018]

Family speaks to World Socialist Web Site: Unanswered questions surround the suicide of Australian paramedic Tony Jenkins
[6 September 2018]

Paramedic’s suicide points to crisis in Australian ambulance services
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