

# Labor's health cut plan a warning on eve of Australian state election

Gary Alvernia  
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In the final week of the campaign for tomorrow's election in the Australian state of Queensland, the Labor Party government revealed that it intends to extract more than \$1 billion in cuts from the public health service over the next four years.

This is part of Labor's pledge to the financial markets to pay off the predicted blowout in the state debt due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Labor's announcement is a warning of the coming assault on social spending, regardless of who wins the election, and of a similar offensive nationally against the living and working conditions of ordinary people.

Directly contradicting Labor's election promises to increase staffing in the chronically under-resourced public health system in the middle of the pandemic, these cuts again show Labor's priority to be the defence of corporate profit interests.

Earlier in the election campaign, Labor had announced plans to hire 10,000 badly-needed health care workers over the next four years, including doctors, nurses and allied health staff. However, in releasing Labor's election policy costings, state Treasurer Cameron Dick said this promise would depend on Queensland Health finding savings in other areas by at least 2 percent per year—that is \$270 million per annum for a total of \$1.08 billion.

Dick pointed to the expected \$102 billion state debt, \$18 billion higher than previously predicted as a result of COVID. He claimed that such savings did not need to include staff cuts, yet refused to say how the “productivity dividend” would be met. He said there would be “no restrictions” on how Queensland Health delivered the cuts.

This “dividend” will mean the further erosion of health services. The repayment of the state debt, considered important to the corporate elite, will take precedence over the lives and social conditions of workers.

Labor Premier Annastacia Palaszczuk, like Labour Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern in New Zealand, has largely run her election campaign on a supposed effective performance in containing the pandemic, saying the state has had a relatively low number of COVID cases due to its border

controls.

However Labor's enforcement of border restrictions, while imposed under the pressure of legitimate popular concern about the pandemic, reflects the interests of big business, most of which has been able to keep operating in Queensland without safety restrictions.

In fact, Queensland Labor has been in the forefront of starting to impose the economic burden of the pandemic on working class people. It has enacted a two-year wage freeze for public sector workers and was the first state government to lift a six-month moratorium on residential rental evictions last month.

Housing Minister Mick de Brenni said the residential eviction freeze was important “when movement in Queensland was much more restricted,” but the state's health response meant it could now shift focus to “supporting businesses.”

By contrast, commercial tenants had their own eviction moratorium extended to December 31, with Attorney-General Yvette D'Ath saying that would give businesses “certainty” and help the state “build towards economic recovery.”

Labor has also boosted the coal mining industry, including by providing tax deferrals to the proposed Adani Carmichael mine, and closing an inquiry into the inadequate safety standards that caused the serious injury of five mining workers this year in an explosion at the Grosvenor mine.

Leaked documents estimate that the Adani tax royalty deferral is worth \$270 million, equivalent to one year of the cuts demanded in the public health system, which is responsible for the lives and health of over 5 million people.

It is not the coronavirus pandemic that has caused Labor to betray its pledges to repair the under-funded hospital and health care system. Labor, which has been in office since 2015, and for most of the three decades before that, has had years to increase the funding and staffing levels in Queensland Health by the levels promised.

Labor was elected in 2015 largely due to the deep hostility among workers to the sweeping public sector job cuts,

including the destruction of 4,500 full-time health care jobs, by the previous Liberal National Party (LNP) government of Premier Campbell Newman.

The LNP's attempt to exploit the news of Labor's intended cuts, is equally fraudulent. Claiming that an LNP government would not slash health care, it said it would find \$3.2 billion in cuts in other social services.

Public health care has been eviscerated by every government, state and federal, since the 1980s, beginning with Hawke-Keating federal Labor governments.

The introduction of fee-for-service pay structures decreased overall funding. This was combined with the increasing encroachment of private corporations into health care services, and outright closures of hospitals and other health facilities. Australia now averages just 2.5 public hospital beds per 1,000 population. That number is rising barely 1 percent each year, three times slower than for beds in the private sector, despite an ageing population with higher medical needs.

The coronavirus pandemic has proven how woefully inadequate health care services are for managing large increases in critically ill patients. As in Europe, the United States and other parts of Australia, Queensland lacks sufficient hospital beds, intensive care units (ICUs) and personal protective equipment and would be rapidly overwhelmed in the event of an uncontrolled outbreak.

Labor's health care record is part of a wider picture. It has been in office in Queensland since 1989, interrupted by only two short periods of LNP rule. Yet, even before the pandemic, half of Australia's most distressed areas in terms of housing stress and poverty were located in Queensland.

Palaszczuk's own seat of Inala had an official unemployment rate of 18.5 percent in March. The pandemic has since intensified the high levels of joblessness, financial insecurity and social crisis.

While both Labor and the LNP are committed to cutting public spending, they are further boosting funding for the police and vowing to ramp up "law and order" measures directed against rising social unrest.

Last Wednesday's sole election debate between Palaszczuk and LNP leader Deb Frecklington saw the pair vying to outdo each other on this front. To try to justify the LNP's proposal for an unprecedented general curfew on youth in the state's north, Frecklington claimed that "crime is out of control in north Queensland" because of Labor's "soft on crime approach."

Palaszczuk answered by restating Labor's pledge to deploy 2,025 more police over the next four years, an extra 150 for each region of the state. She accused Frecklington of supporting a cut in the number of senior police officers while she was a minister in the Newman government.

This election is a graphic illustration of the need for the working class to make a conscious break from the entire political establishment, including the trade union-backed Labor Party. While Frecklington was a member of the vicious Newman LNP government, Palaszczuk was a key minister in the previous Labor government of Anna Bligh.

Bligh and her predecessor, long-time Premier Peter Beattie, opened the door for the Newman government by implementing a pro-business program year after year, culminating in the privatisation of Queensland Rail and other services and the destruction of thousands of jobs.

Various right-wing populist parties are standing candidates to try and exploit the rising political discontent. But all these formations, such as the anti-immigrant One Nation, the regional Katter's Australian Party and mining mogul Clive Palmer's United Australia Party, favour cutting social services to bolster corporate profits.

As for the Greens, they are focussing their campaign on affluent electorates in Brisbane, the state capital. They have indicated their desire to form a coalition government with Labor, with Greens leader Mike Berkman saying "everything would be on the table" in post-election negotiations with the Labor Party. Where the Greens have previously shared office, such as in Tasmania, they have proven just as ruthless as Labor and the Liberal-National Coalition in carrying out austerity measures.

Regardless of the government that arises from Saturday's election, whether by outright majority or sordid dealing, the result will be an administration deeply hostile to workers, underscoring the necessity to build a new revolutionary socialist leadership in the working class.



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