

Australian mental health workers to take stopwork action

Margaret Rees
15 March 2022

Public mental health nurses and workers in the state of Victoria are taking three-hour statewide stopwork action this Thursday over a stalled enterprise bargaining agreement (EBA). There has been no agreement with the state Labor government since 2019, so they are working with 2016 wage levels.

The Health and Community Services Union (HACSU) has called the stoppage to try to head off the palpable anger of the workers toward Premier Daniel Andrews' government, which is apparently reneging on even the regressive EBA that the union pushed through last October.

After a protracted campaign of bans and work stoppages, deliberately limited by the HACSU and interrupted by COVID-19 lockdowns, mental health workers voted in October to accept another retrograde EBA, subject to agreement between the government and the HACSU on the final drafting.

For months, the HACSU had divided mental health workers into separate stoppages. When COVID restrictions prevented a march on parliament, the union presented an abject letter appealing to members of parliament.

After the workers rejected a flat 2 percent annual pay offer in August, the union-government deal split them in monetary terms, and still left them far behind soaring inflation. Nurses and Patient Service Officers would receive 3 percent for three years and 1.5 percent in the fourth, with a one-off payment equivalent to 3 percent to be backdated to December 2020.

That works out to 2.6 percent compound average over four years, when inflation is already 3.5 percent, even according to the understated Consumer Price Index, and is now rising rapidly, driven by escalating fuel and food prices.

Allied health workers, administrative staff and lived-

experience workers would receive even less—2 percent over four years, plus a miserable “retention bonus” of \$750 for 2021, \$1,500 in 2022, \$2,000 in 2023 and \$2,000 in 2024.

The HACSU, which covers many mental health workers, said the union would be involved in the final drafting stages before presenting the agreement for voting. However, after four months, no final draft was submitted by the Victorian Hospitals Industry Association (VHIA) and Department of Health.

No explanation has been forthcoming from the Labor government for the holdup. The HACSU announced on March 11 it had received a draft EBA from the government but did not reveal the contents to its members.

Victorian mental health workers be warned: The fact the details of the EBA are being kept secret could mean the government has reneged on the entirely inadequate terms of the October deal to demand greater attacks on wage levels or working conditions.

Mental health workers confront an increasingly impossible situation due to rising mental health admissions with no additional staff or resources.

In every state, health workers, teachers and other public sector workers face similarly unsustainable and intolerable workloads, and this has triggered strikes, including by teachers and nurses in neighbouring New South Wales (NSW).

Significantly, NSW nurses took strike action on February 15, defying a ban on their action by the state Industrial Relations Commission (IRC). The NSW government threatened punitive legal action against the nurses but backed down due to fear such action would lead to widespread opposition and industrial action.

The nurses' refusal to accept the IRC ruling provides an important example for Victorian mental health

workers. Whether it be the NSW Nurses and Midwives Association (NSWNMA) or HACSU, all unions tie workers to the industrial relations straitjacket, used to suppress workers' struggles.

Workers must unite their struggles and not allow the unions to separate and dissipate their actions.

The HACSU argued last October against continuing industrial action, warning “the government is likely to reduce their pay offer over coming months based on current economic realities.” These “realities” are the demands of the capitalists for profits, at the expense of the lives and health of the working class. This is what the Andrews government obeys, not bankrupt pleas by unions, supposedly on behalf of their members.

Credit rating agencies are demanding that the state budget, which has a massive \$100 billion debt, be returned to surplus. Moody’s gave Victoria a negative outlook in February, saying it reflected “a marked erosion in Victoria’s governance of its public finances.” These demands mean the slashing of public sector wage levels and increased exploitation.

The decisions of all state and federal governments, spearheaded by the Andrews Labor and NSW Liberal-National governments, to scrap all public health measures to curb the spread of COVID-19 has resulted in the spread of the virus to levels not seen since the beginning of the pandemic, and the health workforce has taken the full brunt.

In January, as Omicron surged, mental health clinicians were crushed by demand as rosters for 24-hour specialist teams went unfilled. Crisis Assessment and Treatment (CAT) teams had to halt home callouts due to high numbers of staff absences. Some mental health units in hospitals operated with two staff instead of the usual seven, with the worst-hit hospitals in working class areas.

A central feature of the proposed EBA is a Royal Commission Working Group (RCWG) to discuss recommendations from the Royal Commission into Mental Health and Wellness. This is designed to entrench the HACSU’s partnership with the government. It is another corporatist mechanism to enforce the shocking conditions workers face behind fraudulent claims that the union officials are advocating for their members.

The role of the unions in suppressing the struggles of workers is exposed by the real wage cuts inflicted

during the pandemic. According to the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) itself, a worker on the average income of \$68,000 effectively had a pay cut of \$832 in 2021. Consumer prices rose 3.5 percent, while wages stagnated at 2.3 percent.

Frontline employees in health and social support lost \$967, with education and logistics workers losing even more.

As part of the ACTU, the HACSU’s actions have helped the Labor government seek to impose the supposed “economic realities” on the mental health workforce by locking in the exploitative, unsafe and increasingly impossible working conditions.

This again shows that workers can only fight for their basic rights through a complete break with the HACSU and other unions. New organisations of struggle are required, including independent rank-and-file committees controlled by workers themselves.

Such committees would link up with general nurses and health workers, paramedics, doctors and health workers internationally, who face similar intolerable conditions. They would be faced with the need to fight for a socialist perspective aimed at establishing high-quality, well-funded public healthcare, including by placing the banks and the corporations under public ownership and democratic workers’ control.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:
wsws.org/contact