

Australia: Health workers strike reveals mounting opposition to union bureaucracy and Labor

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At stop-work meetings yesterday, striking health workers in New South Wales (NSW) challenged union officials who are isolating their struggle against the unbearable conditions in the sector and a public sector wage cap that amounts to a pay cut.

The growing anger directed towards the bureaucrats, indicates why the Health Services Union (HSU) felt compelled to call the statewide strike action yesterday. It involved paramedics, radiographers, support services officers, cleaners, security, and kitchen staff.

The union was clearly fearful that if it did not hold the action, the mounting anger among rank-and-file workers could erupt out of its control. In the lead-up to the stoppage, HSU Secretary Gerard Hayes said he was letting workers “off the leash.”

But the action was designed to isolate workers. Despite widespread support for unified action with nurses and midwives, who held their second statewide strike on March 31, the HSU made its workers wait another week. Yesterday’s stoppages were limited to just four hours for major metropolitan hospitals in Sydney, and two hours for regional hospitals.

Paramedics had a one-hour online call in the morning, in which they still responded to emergency calls.

Around 80 workers attended the outdoor Newcastle stop-work meeting, despite driving rain. The meeting was addressed by HSU Assistant Secretary Lynne Russell and various Labor MPs, including leader of the NSW Labor opposition Chris Minns. Their remarks were entirely couched in calls for the government to negotiate with the unions. Minns said, “We are calling on the government... to sit down with the heroes of the pandemic, to come to a solution.”

Following the speeches, Tony, a wardsman, interjected, “COVID is the biggest issue here. You haven’t

mentioned it. We work with COVID every day, numbers of us have been sick. We don’t get any thanks for that, we don’t get a pat on the back, we don’t get anything! We just get this pathetic low wage. So, what is going to happen? Are we going to get this wage rise or not? Or are you just going to play around with us?” (See: “Striking New South Wales health workers speak out”).

Russell attempted to shut the worker down, claiming she had mentioned COVID. In truth, any mention of the virus was entirely focused on the outbreak in 2020 and token references to health workers as “pandemic heroes.” Nothing was said about the criminal “let it rip” policies embraced by all Australian governments, Labor and Liberal-National alike, that caused a wave of mass infection, illness and death and brought the hospital system to its knees.

This was hardly an accident. Minns, who appeared on the platform, is directly responsible for the COVID catastrophe. He has marched in lockstep with extreme right-wing NSW Premier Dominic Perrottet, who has played a central role in the full “reopening” of the economy, in league with Victorian Labor Premier Daniel Andrews. The presence of Minns demonstrates again that the union fully supports this profit-driven program.

Tony responded, “You can call us heroes, but the point is we have got to put up with COVID every day.” The bureaucrat then shut down the discussion, saying, “Stop, I don’t want to argue with you.”

Another worker addressed the Labor MPs directly: “We haven’t received a pay rise in so long. When was the last time you politicians had a pay rise, a couple of months ago? Why haven’t we? We do more work than the government anyway, we should be getting their pay rises.”

The meeting at the Sydney Trades Hall was addressed

by Hayes. He focused on the 5.5 percent pay rise demand that the union is putting forward, saying the “short-term” goal is getting it put in the upcoming NSW budget. He thanked the various politicians at the event, saying it is “so great we are all coming together.”

In other words, the union is directing workers to plaintive appeals to the very politicians who have enforced the pay cap for over a decade, and have no intention whatsoever is providing a decent wage increase.

In contrast to the HSU’s open embrace of the various Labor politicians at the meeting, one worker pointed to the Labor Party parliamentarian for Fairfield, Guy Zangari, and said, “You should work in our hospitals, earn our wage, do our job, and see if we deserve a pay rise. Not one of those bastards could manage a mortgage and put food on the table for our kids.

“I don’t just support myself. I have to support my daughter who lost her job three f**king times during the pandemic. I can’t pay for my mortgage, they are talking about rents going up, they don’t care about that. All they care about is they are going to get a nice pay increase.”

Just as in Newcastle, there was almost no mention of the pandemic, except for a reference to the “fear” health workers had in March and April 2020 that they would bring the pandemic home.

When the meeting was opened up for discussion, however, workers detailed the intense difficulty of working in the hospitals, continually risking their lives due to the pandemic.

The union’s silence on the pandemic, which has been the major trigger for the crisis in the healthcare system across Australia, is deliberate. It has been the same for every major industrial action, including the recent nurses’ strikes, and the NSW teachers’ strike last year, where the major issue of the pandemic was not mentioned.

This is because the unions have not only embraced the homicidal reopening policies, they have implemented them. In December last year, the HSU joined the NSW Nurses and Midwives’ Association (NSWNMA) and the Australian Salaried Medical Officers Federation to work out a “protocol” to force potentially infectious health workers who had been exposed to COVID-19 back to work.

The promotion of Labor at the meetings is a warning that the unions will implement the next stage of the “live with the virus” program, as the even more infectious BA.2 variant creates a new surge.

The unions are seeking to line workers up behind the campaigns of Labor in the upcoming federal election, and

a state ballot that will be held next year. Labor governments, at the state and federal level, have played a central role in the offensive against public healthcare. Labor was in office in NSW for almost 20 years, as it slashed health and education spending, accelerated the privatisation of both, and ruled in the interests of the property developers and big business.

At the federal level, the previous Rudd-Gillard Labor government sought to open public health up to the full force of the market. This included initiatives such as expanded “casemix,” allocating funding on the basis of procedures performed at competitive costs, and the National Disability Insurance Scheme, which has effectively privatised much of disability care.

Federal Labor leader Anthony Albanese, whose election the unions are supporting, is pitching himself to the corporate elite as the candidate best placed to implement sweeping pro-business restructuring, and to boost productivity, code words for a stepped-up onslaught on the jobs, wages and conditions of the working class. In his recent budget-reply speech, Albanese did not pledge a cent to the public healthcare system.

The angry response of workers at the meetings demonstrates mounting opposition to Labor, a party of big business, and the trade unions, which function as an industrial and political police force. They are not workers’ organisations, but corrupt apparatuses that serve the interests of a privileged bureaucracy, tied to the profit-system and the major parties.

The crucial issue is how this emerging rebellion against the union bureaucracy, and the demands of workers for a unified struggle of all health workers, can go forward.

The Socialist Equality Party is fighting for the formation of rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions, at all hospitals and throughout the sector. These are the only means of developing a democratic discussion among workers, free from the interference and censorship of the bureaucrats; uniting workers throughout the sector, and preparing joint industrial and political action, including mass strikes.



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