

Australian aged care workers vote to strike in three states

Martin Scott
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More than 7,000 aged care workers in Queensland, South Australia (SA) and Western Australia (WA) have voted for industrial action, including strikes, in the coming weeks, with a further 5,000 workers due to vote in the next week.

According to the United Workers Union (UWU), which covers them, this will be the first ever “national” strike by aged care workers.

More than 90 percent of workers endorsed the planned industrial action, reflecting a groundswell of discontent over poverty-level wages, rampant casualisation, chronic staff shortages and the devastating impact of COVID-19.

A similar determination has been demonstrated among broader sections of health workers, who also have seen their already dire conditions worsened through more than two years of the pandemic. This was shown in recent strikes by nurses, midwives and other public sector health workers, along with paramedics in New South Wales (NSW), mental health workers in Victoria and aged care workers in Queensland and Tasmania.

Workers at the NSW rallies voiced the need for unified strike action by all health workers, along with wider sections of the working class. The unions and the ruling class as a whole are acutely aware that growing numbers of workers want to fight as a unified force.

Desperate to prevent such a mobilisation, the UWU is following the same playbook as all the other health unions, keeping the strikes isolated.

The industrial action will be limited to UWU members at one of a short list of private aged care providers. Workers at BlueCare and Churches of Christ in Queensland, Southern Cross Care and Anglicare in SA, as well as Hall & Prior and Aegis in WA, have voted already. They may be joined by workers at Regis in WA and Bolton Clarke in SA, depending on the results of ballots still to be finalised.

Aged care workers in Australia’s two most populous

states, NSW and Victoria, are excluded from the industrial action, along with those covered by other health unions. NSW Health Services Union secretary Gerard Hayes told the media that his members would not join the action.

The UWU has not set a date for a strike but said it would take place before the federal election on May 21.

The timing makes clear that the UWU is engaged in a cynical ploy to divert the anger and frustration of these workers into a campaign to elect a Labor government. Asked by journalists whether the industrial action would take place in the weeks leading up to the election, UWU aged care director Carolyn Smith said: “You’d be crazy not to, wouldn’t you?”

Smith said: “This is their [the workers] moment after years of aged care not getting much attention.” The reality is, aged care has deteriorated for decades, not years, as successive federal governments, Labor and Liberal-National alike, have under-funded it and ignored repeated recommendations for improved pay and conditions, and even minimal standards of care for residents.

The UWU’s attempt to promote illusions that the profound crisis in the aged care system will be resolved at the election flies in the face of reality.

Following Labor leader Anthony Albanese’s budget reply on March 31, the UWU declared: “Labor’s plan to fix aged care addresses years of neglect.” In fact, Albanese’s promises were vague and meagre.

Under a Labor government, Albanese said, aged care facilities would be required to have a registered nurse (RN) on site at all times. But with no mandated staffing ratio, a single RN could be expected to cover any number of residents. Albanese said Labor would “work with” private aged care providers on “nutritional standards” for residents and promised unspecified “new funding, more staff and better support to the aged care sector.”

In 2003, 21 percent of aged care workers were

registered nurses. Over the past two decades, this has fallen to 15.6 percent. The vast bulk of the workforce now consists of “personal care workers” with minimal training.

More than one-fifth of workers in the sector are employed on a casual or labour-hire basis, while just 6 percent have permanent full-time jobs.

One in five aged care workers plans to quit within the next year, according to a survey conducted in January and February by the Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation (ANMF). Younger workers were more likely to want to leave aged care, with 37 percent of those aged 18–29 intending to do so within 12 months.

The UWU, along with the other health unions, has lauded Labor’s promise to abide by any ruling made by the Fair Work Commission (FWC) in a case beginning next week seeking a 25 percent increase to the minimum wage for aged care workers. The reality is, with entry-level wages currently at just over \$23 per hour, even a positive outcome in this case would leave workers with poverty-level wages.

The FWC is a pro-business tribunal. It was established by the Rudd-Gillard Labor government with the backing of the unions and serves to suppress wage growth and outlaw almost all forms of industrial action. Under Australia’s industrial relations laws, rooted in the union-backed measures of the Hawke-Keating Labor governments of 1983–1996, workers are only permitted to strike over wages and conditions during narrow enterprise bargaining periods at individual workplaces.

The unions strictly enforce these draconian rules, as a means of suppressing workers’ demands for industrial action, while promoting illusions that workers can prosecute their struggles within the framework of the FWC.

Like the other health unions, the UWU has stifled workers’ opposition on the single most pressing issue for them—the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Smith made token references to the federal government’s “failure” to properly handle the vaccination rollout, the lack of personal protective equipment (PPE) and the deaths of aged care residents in the Omicron outbreak.

However, the union has enforced the “let it rip” policies adopted by every Australian government, state, territory and federal, Liberal-National and Labor. Under this profit-driven reopening agenda, the few remaining public health measures are being ended as infections and deaths continue to mount. As a result, the deadly virus will keep circulating and mutating, presenting a massive ongoing

risk to the health and lives of aged care residents and staff.

By April 13, more than 2,000 COVID-19 deaths had occurred as a result of outbreaks in aged care, while at least 28,485 residents and 28,806 workers had been infected.

The dire conditions in aged care cannot be addressed outside of a fight to eliminate COVID-19. This requires a global struggle, which is impossible within the nationalist and capitalist framework of the unions and parliamentary parties.

To demand secure jobs, adequate levels of properly-trained staff, safe working conditions and a genuine pay increase, over and above the soaring cost of living, aged care workers need to take matters into their own hands.

That means a conscious break with the unions and Labor, and the formation of independent rank-and-file committees in every workplace. Through a network of these committees, aged care workers can reach out to other workers throughout the health sector and the entire working class, to take up a unified struggle against COVID-19 and the decades-long assault on public health and aged care funding.

This is a fight that requires a new political perspective to oppose the dictates of the capitalist system, which demands the subordination of every aspect of human life to the profit interests of the wealthy elite.

As outlined in our election statement, the Socialist Equality Party is advancing a program of action for the working class, for a socialist future in which the massive wealth and resources currently in the hands of the major banks and corporations will be used to provide high-quality public health, aged care, education and other social needs of ordinary people.

We encourage aged care workers who agree with this perspective to contact the SEP today.

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To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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