

At bogus aged care rallies, nurses union promotes Australia Labor Party's big business election campaign

Our reporters
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The New South Wales Nurses and Midwives' Association (NSWNMA) held rallies Wednesday in several regional centres of the state including Wyong, Shoalhaven, Gosford, the Blue Mountains, and Yass.

The protests were a demonstration of the utter cynicism and bankruptcy of the NSWNMA and the other corporatised unions. Their sole purpose was to bolster the campaign of the big business Labor Party for the May 21 federal election, by promoting its threadbare posturing on aged care.

Union officials heaped fulsome praise on Labor leader Anthony Albanese, with one speaker at the Blue Mountains rally in Katoomba choking back tears of joy as she recounted hearing him speak. Labor MPs were given the platform and nurses in Katoomba were handed pre-made union placards stating, "Vote Labor to fix aged care."

The rallies were not connected to strike action or any form of struggle against the horrendous conditions in aged care, which the NSWNMA has worked might and main to prevent.

The events were described as a "solidarity rally" by NSWNMA organiser Shirley Lee who chaired the Blue Mountains rally. Solidarity was not being extended to the aged care nurses set to take strike action in the states of Queensland, South Australia and Western Australia, but to Labor and its right-wing representatives.

Attendance was low, with only around 10 nurses participating in Wyong and approximately 20 in the Blue Mountains. This was deliberate on the part of the union, which made no attempt to mobilise significant layers of aged care workers, much less other health staff.

The fear was that even at a stage-managed affair, the presence of large numbers of aged care staff and health workers could open up a discussion of the issues they face, and raise the need for broader action. To call these events "rallies" is a misnomer, they were little more than photo opportunities for Labor MPs.

Nurses at the nearby Blue Mountains Hospital were not even aware there was a nurse's rally taking place outside the hospital.

Barely any mention was made of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has devastated aged care centres because of the "let it

rip" policies implemented over the past four months.

According to government data released yesterday, 2,181 people have died so far due to COVID-19 outbreaks in aged care centres, almost one third of Australia's total death toll. This is set to rise with the new BA.4 variant detected and a new wave of infections due to the elimination of virtually all health measures.

The silence was hardly accidental. Labor has implemented the pro-business "herd immunity" policies and the unions, including the NSWNMA, have enforced them.

Ignoring the pandemic, Lee claimed in opening the Blue Mountains rally that "after 20 years of fighting we've finally got a glimmer of hope," referring to the potential of a Labor government. She made no attempt to substantiate this illusion-mongering.

The main speaker was federal Labor parliamentarian Susan Templeman who said that Labor had been trying to improve the aged care system. "We started it in government and then lost government," she said, before complaining, "there's not good enough accountability by the providers to ensure tax payers dollars are being effectively used."

In fact, the attack on aged care is a bipartisan policy, spearheaded by previous Labor governments going back to the Keating Labor administration of the 1990s, which implemented a series of pro-market reforms including raising resident's fees and introducing entry bonds for residents.

In 2012, the Gillard Labor government, in a de-facto coalition with the Greens, increased the portion that aged care residents and their family must pay and eliminated the distinction between low and high care residents. A "high care" resident is someone who "require[s] a lot of assistance with activities of daily living such as feeding, dressing, cleaning and mobility," according to agedcareguide.com.au.

Templeman claimed that if elected, "The very first thing that Labor will be doing will be putting in a submission to Fair Work Australia to support a pay raise for aged care workers," but "None of this will happen unless Labor wins the election, and Labor won't win unless I win Macquarie."

These assertions have less credibility than the pitch made by a

discredited used-car salesman. Fair Work, established by the last Labor government with the full support of the unions, has slashed wages over the fifteen years since it was created. Like Labor, it is an enemy of the working class, committed to suppressing pay, boosting profits and preventing any action by workers.

The union speakers made no criticism of Templeman's claims, nor did they raise the historical role of the Labor Party in creating the crisis in aged care. Instead, at the conclusion of the rally, Lee told workers to speak to others about voting Labor, help hand out how-to-vote cards, and vote for Labor.

Speaking to the *World Socialist Web Site*, **Barbara**, an aged care nurse with 40 years' experience explained the dire situation in aged care. "I've been in the one facility for 35 years. It's probably the worst I've seen in regard to staffing, morale of the staff." She said 13 of the 15 residents in one of the facilities "houses" have contracted COVID-19.

"Often there's only one nurse in each house of 20 people. They have had to try and bring other staff in from parts of the facility to work in the house with the high level of infection from COVID but that's then leaving the other houses short of staff. It's just disastrous really and our facility is not on its own in that regard. That is just typical of aged care."

Expressing broader sentiment among health workers, Barbara said she thought uniting strike action with teachers, nurses, railway and bus workers was "a fantastic idea. We should be united." When asked why this had not taken place she said, "Maybe the heads of all those unions should get their heads together and be united in their strike."

In reality, it is the unions that are keeping workers divided. Nurses have now taken strike action three times this year after 10 years in which the union was able to prevent any stoppages. However, in all those strikes aged care nurses were not permitted to take part by the union, which enforces the anti-strike laws contained in the Fair Work Australia legislation. Aged care nurses at the Blue Mountain rally did not know that last week over 90 percent of aged care nurses had voted to take strike action in Queensland, Western Australia, and South Australia over the growing crisis in aged care.

The union promotion of Labor is a warning to all health workers, not only in aged care but across the board. Reflecting Labor's character as an unalloyed party of the banks and big business, Albanese is waging the party's most right-wing campaign ever.

Labor has allocated barely a pittance in woeful health spending pledges, under conditions of an unprecedented crisis in the sector. Above all, Albanese is pitching Labor to the financial elite as a better vehicle for the implementation of "budget repair" and "economic restructuring," code words for sweeping cuts to health and education and a stepped-up offensive against jobs, wages and conditions.

The unions support this program because they are not workers' organisations in any sense of the term but

bureaucratic apparatuses that function as an industrial and police force of governments and big business.

In its election campaign, the Socialist Equality Party is advancing a fighting socialist program of action for the growing numbers of workers entering into struggle.

We call for the establishment of rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions, in aged care and throughout healthcare. These are the only means of breaking the isolation imposed by the unions and developing a unified struggle by all health staff in NSW, Australia and internationally.

Billions must be allocated to public health, to ensure free high-quality care for all. Tens of thousands of new nurses must be trained and hired. Workers throughout the sector must be provided with an immediate and substantial pay rise, and have future wages indexed to the cost of living, with an automatic monthly cost of living adjustment to keep pace with rising expenses.

The dire conditions in aged care must be ended. This poses the rollback of the privatisation of the sector, by Labor and the Coalition, and the transformation of aged-care into a publicly funded social right available to all.

These demands raise the need for a new political perspective, direct against the domination of big business over every aspect of society. What is required is a fight for a workers' government, which would place the banks and the major corporations under democratic workers' control, while implementing socialist policies, including a massive increase in public healthcare funding.

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