

Australian union turns aged care workers' strike into Labor election stunt

Our reporters
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Thousands of aged care workers in Queensland and Western Australia (WA) walked off the job for up to five hours on Tuesday over low wages, longstanding staff shortages and dire conditions exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has ravaged the sector.

The workers rallied in Brisbane, Queensland and Perth, WA, as well as in Adelaide, South Australia, although the latter event was only attended by off-duty workers.

In the hands of the United Workers Union (UWU), the rallies were undisguised campaign events for the Labor Party. While workers voted to strike almost a month ago, the action was timed to occur in the closing weeks of the federal election campaign. UWU Aged Care director Carolyn Smith declared: “You’d be crazy not to, wouldn’t you?”

At the Brisbane rally, UWU organisers proudly announced the presence of the Labor delegation—Queensland Deputy Premier Steven Miles, federal Shadow Minister for Aged Care Services Clare O’Neil and four candidates for the House of Representatives.

The reality is, the election of a Labor government will do nothing to resolve the crisis in aged care. The poverty-level wages and dire conditions in aged care, even before the pandemic, are the product of decades of funding cuts and privatisation, spearheaded by Labor and enforced by the unions.

Now, Labor has refused to endorse a meagre 25 percent wage increase for aged care workers, leaving the issue, as the unions have done, in the hands of the Fair Work Commission (FWC).

The 25 percent claim would only increase pay for personal care workers to around \$29 per hour. This would not make up for years of stagnant and declining real wages, let alone provide for further increases in the cost of living.

Labor has pledged to require a registered nurse on site at all times in aged care facilities, but with no minimum staffing ratio this could leave a single nurse caring for hundreds of residents. Furthermore, the chronic shortage of qualified nurses, worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic, will likely render many providers unable to meet this requirement.

Labor shares equal responsibility with the Liberal-National Coalition for the pandemic itself, as all Australian governments, state, territory and federal, have adopted the

homicidal “let it rip” COVID-19 strategy in line with the demands of big business.

The unions are entirely complicit. They have enforced the profit-driven reopening at every stage. That is why the pandemic was kept off the agenda at Tuesday’s rallies, although it has infected over 33,000 aged care workers and 37,000 residents, killing more than 2,270.

South Australian workers had also voted to strike, but the UWU called off the action after aged care providers Anglicare and Southern Cross Care (SCC) applied to the FWC to have the industrial action terminated.

In the case of SCC, the pro-business industrial tribunal ruled that, because the staff shortage was so acute, and in view of COVID-19 outbreaks at four of the company’s facilities, the strike must be suspended. In other words, the right of the workers to strike was denied because of the very conditions that had motivated the industrial action.

The UWU enforced this ruling, relying on Australia’s draconian industrial laws, introduced by the Rudd Labor government with the full support of the unions, to shut down the demands of workers for industrial action.

These same “fair work” laws were used to justify the isolation of the strike to workers at just three aged care providers in WA—Aegis, Regis and some Hall & Prior facilities—and two in Queensland—BlueCare and Churches of Christ.

Workers are increasingly determined to fight. But their struggle cannot be waged from within the straitjacket of the union, which aims to divert workers’ anger and frustration back behind Labor and its program of austerity, illness and death.

In its election campaign, the Socialist Equality Party is assisting workers in the establishment of new organisations of struggle—rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions and Labor. These committees must break the bonds of union isolation and reach out to workers throughout aged care and health, as well as broader sections of the working class.

Above all, the catastrophe in aged care poses the need for a socialist perspective aimed at reorganising society to meet social need, not private profit. Socialist policies include the provision of universal, high-quality care for all elderly and

vulnerable people, and a major wage rise, above the rate of inflation, for all aged and health workers along with the development of decent working conditions.

John Davis, a Socialist Equality Party candidate for the Senate in Queensland, together with other SEP campaigners, attended the Brisbane rally and spoke to workers about their conditions and the party's program of action for the working class.

Donna, an aged care hospitality worker, told Davis: "This is the first time that I have been on strike ever since I started this job 31 years ago. I know people who have been working for nearly a decade and haven't had a pay-rise. We get \$22.90 an hour in the kitchen at the moment.

"We work for a privately run church organisation. The executives gave themselves a 30 percent pay rise over Christmas. They have a six-figure sum already."

Linda, who has worked in aged care for 7 years, said: "We don't get bonuses; we don't get pay rises or anything. Even the nursing staff only get a dollar more, and the cleaners are in a similar boat."

The workers said they were feeling the effect of the rising cost of living, with official CPI at 5.1 percent and inflation of non-discretionary expenses even higher.

Donna said: "I am paying \$2.05 per litre for petrol at the moment. That's a lot of money." Linda agreed: "Everything is going up, but wages are not going up for us."

Talley spoke with Davis about the devastating impact of COVID-19 in Queensland after the state Labor government reopened the borders on December 13, 2021. At that time, the state had recorded just 2,176 infections and seven deaths. Now, more than one million people have contracted the virus and 918 have died.

She said: "It is criminal. Opening the borders was the biggest mistake they made. As soon as they opened the borders, bang, all our residents caught COVID, and we lost four. Others died as well, but they are not saying what from."

Three aged care workers from Labrador, 70 kilometres southeast of Brisbane, spoke with Davis.

Melissa said: "Some of us are doing four or five double shifts a week. It's a regular thing, we just don't have the staff. We have three carers for 32 residents. A lot of new recruits do one or two shifts, then they don't come back because it's just too hard."

In addition to taking care of the residents, the workers are expected to train new staff during ordinary shifts.

Adam said: "They don't get trained properly because we are always busy. We can't stop. How do you train people who haven't had any experience?"

Julie explained that COVID-19 had worsened already chronic staff shortages.

She said: "With COVID, we have had a lot of people who are not qualified standing in for people who are off sick. A lot of

them don't know what they are doing, so there's a lot of possibility for error and it's dangerous.

"When something goes wrong, we're the ones who get blamed for it, not management or the government who have caused it and aren't doing anything about it. Politicians are getting a pay rise but we aren't."

Jenna, a 33-year-old aged care worker, said: "I've been working in aged care since I was 18 and it hasn't changed for the better. We've got less time and less access to supplies and services for residents.

"You go to management and talk about what's happening on the floor and how much support we need and we get nothing. At the moment we have a shortage of continence aids for residents, so we have to try to fit residents into continence aids that they are not supposed to be fitting into.

"We have been told that we are only entitled to use one or two towels per resident per day, or we go over our 'linen budget.' There shouldn't even be a 'linen budget,' you know: Wash the towels!"

Jenna said she is paid just \$24 per hour. She stated: "It's not about the money, but you need to survive, and the cost of living is going up. You just learn to cut down and you use your ['buy now pay later' services] Afterpay and Openpay."

Jenna agreed with the need for a larger mobilisation of workers. She said: "Why aren't all aged care workers here? Why are the unions not working together to get all of us here?"

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