

Western Australian health workers to take stopwork action

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4 July 2022

Thousands of Western Australian (WA) health support workers, including kitchen, laundry and cleaning staff and enrolled nurses (ENs) will be joined in stopwork action on July 6 by physiotherapists, pharmacists and administration workers. Five hospitals are included—Sir Charles Gairdner, Perth Children’s, Graylands, Osborne Park and King Edward Memorial.

They are fighting the McGowan state Labor government’s wages cap for public sector workers, which from 2017 was a maximum rise of \$1,000 per year, and is now effectively 2.75 percent per year. The latest cap, announced late last year, is no more than 2.5 percent, plus 0.25 percent or a \$1,000 sign-on bonus.

This is a substantial pay cut, with inflation in Perth, the state capital, running at 7.6 percent in the March quarter, even on the understated official Consumer Price Index.

Two trade unions have called Wednesday’s limited action—the United Workers Union (UWU) covering support workers and ENs, and the Health Services Union (HSU) covering allied health workers. They are part of the Public Sector Alliance, a collection of nine unions formed in mid-2021, supposedly to oppose Labor’s wages cap.

Wednesday’s stopwork follows six months of strike action and industrial bans by nurses, aged carers, health and public sector workers, teachers and rail workers in New South Wales (NSW) in opposition to the now-3 percent wage cap imposed by the Liberal Perrottet government.

Across the country, there is mounting anger against intolerable workloads, the result of chronic staff shortages that existed prior to the pandemic, which were then exacerbated by the impact of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. The exodus of nurses, carers and teachers, unable to sustain the unrelenting demands of

the governments and employers, has created a crisis of unprecedented proportions.

There are growing shortages of WA health care workers, with the biggest gaps in rural and regional areas. More than 33,200 patients were waiting for elective surgery in May, including 8,277 Category 1 and 2 patients, the most urgent categories. COVID-related staff furloughing and patients testing positive for COVID was having a great impact on surgery delays, with health workers often forced to work overtime and extra shifts.

In 2021, ambulance ramping outside WA hospitals, where paramedics are unable to transfer their patients to emergency departments due to bed and staff shortages, doubled the hours of 2020. In April this year alone, ambulances spent 5,100 hours ramped outside hospitals.

A report to the WA parliament found that since 2020 the private ambulance operator, St John Ambulance, has only managed to respond to 77 percent of priority one calls within 15 minutes, well below the 90 percent target. In March this year, two people in their 80s died while waiting for ambulances.

The HSU “plan of action” shows that the July 6 stopwork is a stunt designed to quell the growing fury of workers in the health system, while isolating each section of the workforce and preventing united action, as in NSW.

The HSU plan features a meeting lasting “approximately 30 minutes on the grass between Perth Children’s Hospital and the multi storey car park.” Two lunchtime stoppages would follow at Royal Perth Hospital on July 20 and Fiona Stanley Hospital on August 3, with a tentative August 17 Public Sector Alliance strike to be endorsed by members at the stopwork meetings “if there is no better and fairer pay

deal.”

What a “better and fairer pay deal” means in practice was indicated when the State School Teachers Union of Western Australia, one of the nine unions, broke ranks and accepted a 2.75 percent wages deal with the McGowan government earlier this month.

The whole campaign involves posturing on the part of the unions that they are independent of the dictates of the Labor government and its pro-corporate policies.

Key in this pretence is the UWU. Its pay claim slogan of “Five to survive” refers to a 5 percent pay increase, purportedly to match inflation. The UWU bureaucracy has managed to spawn 26 members of parliament serving in the McGowan government—36 percent of the entire government cohort in both the upper and lower house. This includes Health Minister Amber-Jade Sanderson and Education Minister and Acting Premier Sue Ellery.

The government’s May budget showed a surplus of \$5.7 billion, largely on the back of iron ore royalties from sales to China by WA’s mining moguls. This enabled the restoration of Standard and Poor’s AAA credit rating for the state, which had been downgraded nine years earlier. Part of the Labor government’s reliable fiscal performance in the eyes of the financial markets was based on the public sector wages cap.

The corporate perspective of Mark McGowan, who is both premier and treasurer, includes subsidising Qantas airline’s new routes from Perth to Italy, South Africa and Indonesia, to position the state as the “western gateway” to Australia. He and Qantas head Alan Joyce reached a recent rapprochement after a dispute over WA’s earlier border closure against the pandemic, during which Joyce compared the state to North Korea. Joyce has now gushed that the flights from Perth would not have been achieved without the premier, who had “fought for WA” and “made things happen.”

The Qantas deal is just part of the massive transfer of wealth to the pandemic profiteers by governments both Labor and Liberal, federal and state, at the expense of the working class.

In its May budget the WA government allocated every household a \$400 electricity bill credit, but at the same time decreed that a host of household fees and charges would increase by July 1.

This includes electricity (up 2.5 percent), water (up 2.5 percent), vehicle registration (up 3.8 percent),

drivers’ licences (up 6.4 percent), motor injury insurance (up 2.4 percent) and standard public transport fares (up 2 percent). McGowan said unapologetically that the cost of providing services continued to grow.

The McGowan government, like its counterparts in every state, has lifted all restrictions that had eliminated COVID-19 for the first two years of the pandemic. The decision to allow the virus to spread has resulted in a surge of deaths from nine in the two years to February 2022 to now almost 400—a 44-fold increase in four months.

The WA health workers need to learn from the experiences of their NSW brothers and sisters—while the union bureaucracy has a stranglehold over the fight of workers not a step forward can be taken. To unite these struggles against the governments nationally requires dispensing with these pro-corporate apparatuses.

That means forming rank-and-file committees that are independent of the unions to reach out to fellow workers in other states and internationally to oppose the profit drive of big business governments and fight for decent living standards and working conditions.



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