

Australian health union's "Big Wednesday" campaign is a sham! Form rank-and-file committees to fight for wage increases and decent conditions!

Health Workers Rank-and-File Committee (Australia)
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On Wednesday, public sector members of the Health Services Union (HSU) across New South Wales (NSW) will take limited industrial action, including work bans and stop-work meetings, opposing further cuts to real wages by the state Labor government.

The HSU has some 47,000 members in NSW, including paramedics, radiographers, orderlies, cleaners, security guards, catering workers and administrative staff. Like health workers throughout the country and around the world, they face chronic staff shortages, low pay, long hours and gruelling conditions.

A public health system that was already in chronic crisis as a result of decades of funding cuts by Labor and Liberal-National administrations has entered into a complete breakdown as a result of the "let it rip" COVID policies instituted by every government, with the support of the unions.

The HSU has only called the token actions because it knows it is sitting atop a powder keg. This was all but spelt out by HSU general secretary Gerard Hayes, who told the Murdoch-owned *Australian* newspaper last week that there was "civil unrest just -beneath the surface." An internal survey of HSU members showed that around 95 percent of responses rejected the Labor government's initial wage offer, with 89 percent saying they were prepared to take further industrial action.

The HSU bureaucracy is working to ensure that this action is kept as small and localised as possible, despite their ludicrous, almost self-parodying description of the campaign as "Big Wednesday."

Some workplaces will hold stop-work meetings, while others will institute extremely limited work bans, such as not responding to email. One HSU member told the *World Socialist Web Site* that, at their workplace, there will be no stoppage at all, but merely a "work-to-rule action," in which workers will simply follow the terms of their contract to the letter.

The Health Workers Rank-and-File Committee (HWRFC), a fighting organisation of health staff, supports all actions taken by workers in the sector. But we state bluntly that "Big Wednesday" is a big sham.

In addition to being as limited as is conceivably possible, it is designed to peddle the fraud that improvements to real wages and

working conditions can be achieved through plaintive demands to the Labor government, despite decades and decades of experiences to the contrary. Underlying this is the need to suppress workers' demands for broader and more substantial action as living conditions become increasingly intolerable.

The HSU, along with all other unions, heavily promoted a Labor victory in the March 25 election as a panacea for workers. Now, with Labor in power in NSW, federally, and in every other state and territory except Tasmania, and the cost-of-living crisis only deepening, these lies are starkly exposed.

Labor Premier Chris Minns claimed on election night that, "the people of New South Wales voted for the removal of the unfair wages cap," which currently limits pay increases to 3 percent per annum. But Labor has made clear, both before the election and since, that it has no intention of delivering pay increases anywhere near the 7 percent inflation rate.

Last fortnight, Treasurer Daniel Mookhey and Industrial Relations Minister Sophie Cotsis presented the unions with a one-year pay rise offer of just 4 percent, inclusive of a 0.5 percent increase in superannuation.

The HSU is calling for a 6.5 percent rise, which would itself be a pay cut in real terms. But the reality is that the union bureaucracy will not lead a fight for even this inadequate amount.

The HSU, along with the other health unions, has enforced decades of cuts to wages, conditions and resources in the public hospital system. In one industrial award or enterprise agreement dispute after another, the bureaucracy has shut down workers' opposition and minimised industrial action, and delivered the slashing of budgets demanded by Labor and Coalition governments.

To break out of this downward spiral and fight for real improvements to their wages and conditions, workers need to take matters into their own hands. The HWRFC calls for the establishment of rank-and-file committees in every hospital and workplace, independent of the unions and controlled by workers themselves.

These committees are the only means through which workers can democratically discuss the conditions they confront and

develop a plan of action to fight for demands based on their actual needs, not what governments or union bureaucrats say is affordable or possible.

Through a network of workplace rank-and-file committees, health workers can end the isolation imposed by the union bureaucracy and fight together, not just with HSU members state- and country-wide, but with others throughout the health sector and more broadly.

Workers covered by the HSU work alongside nurses and midwives every day and face the same dire conditions and dire pay. Yet the HSU and NSW Nurses and Midwives' Association (NSWNMA) maintain a brick wall of separation between the two sections of workers.

Last year, nurses and midwives carried out multiple statewide strikes, including mass rallies in Sydney and regional cities. These were powerful demonstrations of the determination of health workers to fight. But the sporadic and increasingly isolated industrial action allowed by the NSWNMA bureaucracy did nothing to improve working conditions or patient safety. Ultimately, the nurses' struggle was diverted into an election campaign for the Labor government that is now seeking to deepen the attack on their wages and conditions.

Despite the feigned surprise and mock anger of Hayes and other bureaucrats, the NSW government's meagre pay offer is completely in line with the wage-slashing austerity agenda of Labor governments throughout the country.

Labor's federal budget, brought down this month, contained sweeping attacks on public healthcare, with total health spending to be reduced from \$115.5 billion in 2021–22 to \$104.1 billion in 2023–24. Meanwhile, Labor is pressing ahead with \$69 billion in tax cuts for the wealthy and a massive increase in military expenditure in preparation for an aggressive, US-led war with China.

The mantra of the Albanese government is that working people must "make sacrifices" to reduce the national debt and pay for militarism and war, by accepting below-inflation pay rises and the further destruction of crucial social services, including healthcare.

Labor and the unions have enforced a deepening attack on the working class, including on the right to strike. In Western Australia (WA), the Industrial Relations Commission last week fined the Australian Nursing Federation (ANF) \$350,000 over a one-day strike in November last year. The massive fine, designed to intimidate workers, was readily agreed to by the ANF and has been met with complete silence from all other unions, including the federal leadership and other state sections of the Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation (ANMF).

Labor's hostility to the lives and health of the working class is sharply expressed in its complete removal of any measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Hospitals continue to face growing numbers of COVID-19 patients every day, and the continual infection of healthcare staff exacerbates chronic staffing shortages.

The crisis in the hospital system, for workers and patients, cannot be resolved without a fight to eliminate the COVID-19 pandemic. This is impossible within the framework of the unions, which have played a critical role in enforcing catastrophic profit-

driven "let it rip" pandemic policies, throughout Australia and around the world.

This underscores the need for health workers to mount their own fight, organised democratically through rank-and-file committees, independently of the union bureaucracy. As part of this struggle, health workers should formulate their own demands. The HWRFC proposes the following as a starting point:

- Immediate hiring of thousands of health workers to end the punishing workloads.
- An immediate across-the-board pay increase of more than 20 percent, with automatic monthly cost of living adjustments.
- Implement public health measures to combat COVID-19, including the reinstatement of paid pandemic leave, the provision of free, high-quality N95s or better for all staff and adequate ventilation/air filtration, as part of a broader program to eliminate the virus.
- Massively expand spending on public health. End the privatisation of essential social services.

These demands will not be won through appeals to the Labor governments, but in a direct political struggle against them. What is true of Labor is true of the union bureaucracies. They do not represent workers, they serve the corporations and the rich.

That has been made crystal clear in the experiences of the pandemic through which health workers have passed. Yesterday's "pandemic heroes" are confronted with the disastrous consequences of the profit-driven "let it rip" COVID policies, and at the same time, they're told "there is no money" to give them decent pay or to improve their appalling work conditions.

Rank-and-file committees must organise strikes, meetings, protests and other industrial actions, independent of the unions, and encompassing all workers who want to fight for their rights.

But this struggle itself will pose the need for a new political perspective. What has become clear is that the most fundamental needs of workers and society as a whole are incompatible with capitalism. Society cannot afford the billionaires and the governments that represent them. The alternative is the fight for a socialist society, in which the resources created by workers will be democratically controlled and allocated by them. Then there would be ample wealth for high-quality public healthcare, education and all other social needs.

We urge health workers to draw lessons from your experiences. Contact us today to discuss forming a rank-and-file committee at your workplace.



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