

Australian health union's "Big Wednesday," a farce aimed at blocking a real struggle by workers

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Yesterday, public sector health workers covered by the Health Services Union (HSU) took part in limited industrial action across New South Wales (NSW), opposing the state Labor government's plans to further cut real wages.

It would not be possible to conceive of a more farcical, limited or fraudulent union-led campaign.

The HSU covers workers in diverse sections of the health system, including paramedics, radiographers, orderlies, cleaners, security guards, catering workers and administrative staff.

Together with the nurses, midwives, doctors and others they work alongside every day, these workers face chronic staff shortages, long hours and low pay.

They work in a public health system that has been devastated by decades of cuts by Labor and Liberal-National governments and brought to its knees by bipartisan "let it rip" COVID policies, implemented with the complete support of the unions.

The Minns government has offered a nominal pay rise of 3.5 percent, plus a 0.5 percent superannuation increase, a substantial cut compared with the rapidly rising cost of living. The HSU is calling for a 6 percent pay increase, plus 0.5 percent super, still less than the official 7 percent inflation rate.

The HSU promoted yesterday as "Big Wednesday," but in fact worked to ensure actions were kept isolated and minimal, restricting workers to limited work bans, work-to-rule actions or lunchtime "stop-work" meetings.

Public demonstrations were held at only a handful of major hospitals, with the largest being a protest of several hundred workers at Westmead Hospital in Western Sydney. Even this was a brief affair of less than 30 minutes, which some workers told the *World Socialist Web Site* they were attending in their lunch hour.

This was not a strike, but a stunt designed to create the illusion that the union will lead a fight for decent wages and conditions.

HSU secretary Gerard Hayes addressed the Westmead rally, along with Unions NSW secretary Mark Morey and HSU branch representatives.

Most spoke in broad and hackneyed phrases about Labor "breaking promises" to deliver a "fair pay rise" to "essential workers" who are the "backbone of health." But the overall message to workers was that their dire conditions are solely the product of ten years of Coalition governments and that the Minns Labor government can be persuaded to shift through chants and plaintive demands.

Hayes centred his remarks on "Stop the Steal," a campaign launched by the union this week, complete with placards depicting Minns as a cartoon thief. Even setting aside the bizarre adoption of a Trumpian slogan used in the fascist attempt to overturn the 2020 US election and violently seize power, this is an attempt to divert workers' from any genuine fight for pay rises and decent conditions.

Instead, the union is trying to focus attention on subsidiary and secondary issues.

Hayes declared that workers "could get a \$35 a week pay rise" if the government was not "taking your personal tax savings." He was referring to a scheme that allows NSW Health workers to use up to \$9,009 of pre-tax income for certain expenses, including housing costs, school fees, insurance, utility bills and car lease payments. At present, workers only receive half of the tax benefit from these arrangements, with the remainder going to NSW Health.

The rhetoric of Hayes and other union officials, opposing personal taxation without any differentiation between its impact on workers and the wealthy, has a definite right-wing character.

Hayes also repeated his call for a Royal Commission into "where the health dollar is being spent, where it's being wasted and where it's being rorted. That would pay for everything and some that we're talking about." The references to "rorts" and "waste" dovetail with complaints by the most aggressive sections of the ruling elite, who are

demanding even greater reductions in health spending than those already imposed.

In other words, the HSU is giving Labor the green light for further cuts in public health spending, as long as the union bureaucracy has a seat at the table to negotiate how those funds are shuffled around. This was expressed explicitly in a recent report published by the HSU, which claimed “Neither NSW or Australia needs to spend more on health care.”

Workers who spoke to the WSWs made clear that, while a real pay rise—well above the union’s paltry 6 percent claim—is sorely needed, the problems in the health system go far deeper.

A Senior Technical Officer at John Hunter Hospital (JHH) in Newcastle said, “The [number of] staff we have is basically the same as in 2005, there’s been no increase, but the workload has increased tremendously. The constant pressure leads to mental health issues and burnout.”

A Day Surgery worker at Westmead said, “They increase the number of patients and they don’t think of what you’ve got to do. Half the time we don’t even get a break. It stresses you, you’ve got to get it all done, but the workload’s too much.”

In stark contrast to the union speakers, who raised COVID only as a thing of the past, if at all, workers emphasised the ongoing impact of the pandemic.

An Operations Assistant at JHH said, “A lot of us have burned through all our sick leave isolating with COVID. I had to go off work three or four times, including when my daughter got COVID twice. We’re told that COVID’s over, but this is what’s happening.”

A Food Services worker at Westmead said, “Even though COVID-19 is still out there, the unions are saying nothing about the safety conditions we are working under.”

The HSU and other health unions say nothing about these conditions, because they agree with, and have enforced, the decimation of public health by Labor and Liberal-National governments over decades, and have played the leading role in enforcing the removal of public health measures against COVID-19.

Yesterday’s stunt only provides a further demonstration that the HSU will continue to impose every wage- and condition-slashing move by state and federal Labor governments.

Taking the ludicrous designation of a handful of work bans and brief stoppages as “Big Wednesday” to a new level of absurdity, Hayes declared that it would be followed in the coming weeks by “Super Tuesday” and “Manic Monday.” Workers should take this as a warning that the HSU bureaucracy plans to ensure that this dispute does not become anything more than a pantomime.

By promoting a phoney fight for changes to salary

packaging and the call for an inquiry into health spending, both of which Labor has agreed to, Hayes and the HSU bureaucracy are preparing the way for a sell-out on wages.

They are promoting these issues in an attempt to distract workers, confuse them, and cover over the union’s support for Labor’s agenda of harsh cuts to wages, conditions and social spending, at both state and federal level.

Above all, the HSU is working to suppress a real fight for decent wages and conditions, and for a high-quality public health system.

To take forward such a fight, workers need to build their own organisations of struggle, rank-and-file committees in every workplace. These committees, democratically controlled by workers themselves, provide the means through which workers can develop a plan to fight for demands based on their own needs, not what governments or unions say is possible or affordable.

Through these committees, they can link up with their counterparts, not just in areas covered by the HSU, but throughout health and more broadly. In the first instance, this means building a united struggle with the thousands of public sector nurses and midwives in NSW who face the same dire conditions and attacks on their already low pay.

Above all, what is needed is a fight to establish workers governments to implement socialist policies, including placing the entire health system, along with the major corporations and banks, under genuine public ownership and democratic workers’ control. This is the only means of reorganising society’s ample resources to provide for the needs of ordinary people, not the profit interests of the wealthy elite.



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