

# Australian health union's online meetings present no way forward for workers

Clare Bruderlin, Martin Scott  
12 June 2023

Following its farcical “Big Wednesday” stoppages on May 31, the Health Services Union (HSU) held two online meetings on June 7 in a continuation of its efforts to isolate and suppress the struggle of public sector health workers in New South Wales (NSW).

The HSU covers a broad range of workers in the public health system including paramedics, radiographers, allied health workers, orderlies, cleaners, security, catering workers and administrative staff. Like nurses and midwives these workers face another massive real wage cut after years of declining wages, chronic understaffing and increasingly dire conditions, exacerbated by the ongoing COVID pandemic.

The NSW Labor government, led by Premier Chris Minns, is offering public sector workers a nominal pay rise of 4 percent plus a 0.5 percent superannuation increase, far short of the rapidly rising cost of living.

The HSU is calling for a 6 percent pay increase plus 0.5 percent super, not enough to keep pace with the official 7 percent inflation rate, let alone to make up for previous cuts. But even this meagre claim is a misdirection designed to create the illusion that the union will lead a fight for decent wages and conditions.

In fact, the June 7 meetings made even more clear the bureaucracy's real aim—to ensure that workers' opposition to Labor's deepening assault on their pay and conditions remains isolated and constrained within the framework of sporadic, isolated stoppages and minor work bans.

Two “resolutions” were put to meeting attendees: “State-wide bans every Tuesday until a fair pay rise is delivered,” and “ongoing strike actions across NSW until a fair pay rise is delivered.” While only a single-digit percentage of the HSU's membership was present, the “yes” vote on both questions by at least 94 percent of attendees across both meetings reflects broader support among the workers for a struggle, including through strike action.

But the union bureaucracy is working to ensure that this finds no expression. The HSU leadership emphasised that the proposed strike actions would be held “at different hospitals across NSW at different times.” By isolating strikes to individual workplaces, the union is seeking to minimise their impact and ensure that the main effect of this campaign is to

demoralise workers and wear down their resolve.

The two online meetings were deliberately designed to be as small and anti-democratic as possible. Workers received only two days' notice, limiting attendance, and the meetings themselves were tightly controlled, with little opportunity for open discussion.

In the first session at midday, workers were told they would have a chance to “vent,” through a Q&A text chat. In the 6 p.m. meeting, even this limited avenue was cracked down upon, with members' written comments only made visible to attendees if approved by the organisers.

Only a cherry-picked handful of members was allowed to speak. In the 6 p.m. meeting, despite acknowledging that “lots of people” had their hands raised, the organisers insisted that the meeting be ended after just an hour.

Even under these hostile conditions, a few attendees were able to make comments and ask questions that illustrate the growing chasm between the bureaucracy and the workforce.

One worker asked in the chat, “Is there any collaboration between unions that represent nurse/midwifery, doctors and HSU? ... I truly believe that if we ALL did it together on the same day and same time this would be MASSIVE.”

The events of the past year have demonstrated beyond all doubt that this is diametrically opposed to the perspective of the union apparatus. Along with nurses and other health workers, teachers, general public sector workers, as well as rail workers and bus drivers, all carried out strikes, including mass rallies in Sydney and other NSW cities in 2022. But even when these major demonstrations were held in the same week, the unions ensured that no unified struggle was possible.

Another worker wrote, with regards to strike action: “I'll be quite honest, the loss of pay, nobody could take for even one hour, things have gotten that bad.”

HSU NSW Secretary Gerard Hayes seized upon this as an excuse for the limited character of the proposed actions, saying, “I do not want you to lose money to get money.”

Conspicuously absent from Hayes' response is any suggestion that the union would use some of its substantial resources to provide a strike fund. This is a deliberate tactic to increase the already immense financial pressure on workers not to take

industrial action.

Another worker raised the possibility of the union making a political break with the Labor Party, writing, “I think now is the time to not affiliate ourselves with these Labor people anymore until they do something.”

Hayes rejected the proposal outright, stating, “I don’t think that’s the way to go at the moment... I’m on the admin committee and I intend to take action in relation to these politicians at the ALP admin committee.”

This comment highlights the close relationship, not just of Hayes and the HSU, but of the entire union apparatus, to Labor. As a member of NSW Labor’s Administrative Committee, Hayes is, in effect, part of the very government that is seeking to impose further cuts to the wages and conditions of the workers he claims to represent.

In his initial remarks, Hayes repeated his claim that the government’s wage-slashing offer was a case of Labor being slow to live up to its pre-election “commitments,” claiming “the new Labor government’s view is trust us, wait, and we’ll get around to it.” This is not only a falsification of Labor’s election campaign and its broader anti-worker agenda, in NSW and throughout the country, but also promotes the illusion that at some undisclosed future stage the government will “get around to” increasing the pay of public sector workers.

The reality is that Labor’s paltry offer is completely in line with statements from Minns ahead of the election that there was no plan for inflation-level pay increases and that any wage growth must be tied to productivity gains.

This is also the broader agenda of Labor at the federal level and in the other states and territories. The Albanese Labor government backed the recent Fair Work Commission ruling cutting the wages of 2.5 million low-income workers, stating for the second year in a row that it opposes “across-the-board” pay increases in line with inflation. This followed on from a May federal budget that slashed health, education and other social spending while allotting vast billions for the military and coming tax cuts for the wealthy.

This is, in fact, the role that Labor governments, in close collaboration with the unions, have played over the past four decades since the Hawke-Keating administrations between 1983 and 1996 delivered the harshest attack on working-class jobs, wages, conditions and basic rights in Australia’s history.

Labor’s move to sharply cut real wages in NSW exposes the fraudulent campaign waged by the leadership of the HSU and other unions, both in the immediate lead up to the March election, when they pushed the lie that Labor would increase public sector wages, and throughout the past year as they diverted workers’ mass strikes into the election campaign.

With Labor now in government in NSW (as well as federally and in every state and territory except Tasmania), the unions are desperately seeking to promote illusions that workers’ issues can be resolved through back-room negotiations between the government and the union bureaucracy.

Two conclusions must be drawn: 1) The fight for decent wages and conditions is, above all, a political struggle against Labor; and 2) such a fight is impossible while workers are under the stranglehold of the corporatised and Labor-aligned union bureaucracy.

This urgently poses the need for workers to build their own organisation of struggle, rank-and-file committees, the only venue in which workers can democratically discuss the issues they confront and plan a fight for demands based on their needs.

The Health Workers Rank-and-File Committee was initiated by a group of health workers across Australia, with the support of the Socialist Equality Party (Australia), to serve as a steering body for the establishment of rank-and-file committees across the sector.

Through a network of these committees, health workers can link up with broader sections of the working class, including nurses, midwives and other NSW public sector workers who confront the same dire conditions and deepening attacks.

But a unified struggle, in and of itself, is not enough. The dire situation in the hospitals, as well as the COVID “let it rip” policies, demonstrates that capitalism is at war with society. The most basic interests of health workers, and all other sections of the working class, are incompatible with the domination over society of a tiny layer of billionaires and their political representatives.

The alternative is the fight for socialism, the democratic reorganisation of the working class, to place social needs, not private profit, at the forefront. The banks and the corporations must be placed under public ownership and democratic workers’ control so that the billions that are required can be redirected to healthcare, education and other social necessities.

*Contact the Health Workers Rank-and-File Committee today to discuss this perspective and join the fight.*



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