

Australian union shuts down industrial action by New South Wales health workers

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On Friday, the Health Services Union (HSU) announced the suspension of industrial action by public sector health workers in New South Wales (NSW) after “fruitful” meetings with the state government.

Over the past month, HSU members in public health, including paramedics, radiographers, allied health workers, orderlies, cleaners, security, catering workers and administrative staff have carried out limited work bans and sporadic stoppages across the state. They are opposing a meagre 4 percent pay “rise” offer from the Labor government, far below the inflation rate of 7 percent. Workers are also calling for “professional rates” for paramedics and better access to salary sacrificing.

The union’s decision to suspend industrial action followed a meeting with the NSW treasurer, health minister and industrial relations minister, as “a show of good faith in these negotiations.”

The HSU has given workers no information about what, if any, concessions Labor has offered, but now they have been told to stand aside while the union bureaucracy continues to hold backroom meetings with the government.

In a video address to workers, HSU NSW secretary Gerard Hayes said only that the main issues in the dispute had been “discussed” and were “moving in the right direction.” Even the union’s meagre demand for a sub-inflationary 6 percent pay increase was not mentioned, suggesting that workers will soon be urged to accept a lower figure.

The union took care to note that workers will be asked to “advise us of your views” after a renewed offer from the government. This is nothing more than a veneer of “democracy” to cover over the sellout that is being prepared. The HSU made clear that the decision on “next steps” will not be made by the broader

membership, but at a delegates meeting next Monday.

The fact is workers have already endorsed substantial industrial action that the union previously did not allow to proceed and which it has now unilaterally cancelled.

Hayes strongly indicated that any direct role of workers in this dispute was over. He said, “Thanks very much for your impassioned campaign. It has delivered outcomes, but the outcomes need to be realised.”

From the outset, the HSU’s campaign has been directed at smothering workers’ “passion,” not at giving it expression.

At statewide meetings held on June 7, at least 94 percent of HSU members who attended voted in favour of continuing industrial action, including through work bans every Tuesday and strikes. Though every measure was taken to limit the attendance at these meetings and suppress discussion, with only a few hundred workers in attendance, the vote nonetheless underscored the substantial opposition among health workers towards the assault on their wages and conditions.

By limiting workers to brief stoppages at individual hospitals and providing no strike pay, the union leadership has ensured that the main effect of the actions so far has been to discourage workers in preparation for a sellout.

The stage was set with Hayes’ framing of this dispute as merely a case of Labor being too slow to deliver on its election promise to scrap the public sector wage cap. Therefore, all that was required of workers was a handful of stunts, like the farcical “Big Wednesday,” to give the government a gentle nudge in the right direction.

As Hayes and the rest of the HSU leadership are well aware, this conception has no basis in reality.

NSW Labor made clear before the March election

that it would deliver further real wage cuts throughout the public sector and that even nominal pay increases would have to be paid for by workers themselves through “productivity gains.”

This is in line with the broader agenda of Labor governments at every level across the country. 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 \$11 billion from public health, as well as making cuts to education and other social spending. At the same time, billions were allotted for the military and tax cuts for the rich.

The role of the HSU, along with all the other unions, is to suppress opposition to Labor’s deepening attacks on workers, preventing any eruption of what Hayes described in May as “civil unrest just beneath the surface.”

This bubbling undercurrent of tension is not just about the latest real pay cut, but years of declining wages, chronic understaffing and dire working conditions resulting from union-enforced funding cuts by state and federal governments, Labor and Liberal-National alike, exacerbated by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

With no perspective to address this crisis, the HSU has instead sought to head off this “civil unrest” both by promoting illusions in Labor and by wearing down the resolve of workers who were determined to fight.

The union’s sudden and entirely anti-democratic decision to shut down industrial action demanded by workers in repeated votes underscores the need for workers to take matters into their own hands.

Contrary to the demoralisation fostered by the HSU, there is a way for workers to take forward this struggle and win, but only if they can break free of the shackles of the union apparatus, which is tied by a thousand threads to Labor and which functions as an arm of the government.

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. This would provide a powerful basis for a political and industrial fight against Labor and its profit-driven agenda of cost cutting.

Above all, the crisis in the public health system, for staff and patients alike, in an expression of the incompatibility of the capitalist system with the fundamental needs of workers and society.

This means that the struggle for decent wages and conditions for health workers is inseparable from the fight to establish workers’ governments and place the major banks and corporations under public ownership and democratic workers’ control so that the vast wealth currently controlled by a tiny wealthy elite can be redirected to healthcare, education and other social necessities.



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