Australia: Vote “no” to the Health Services Union’s sellout of public sector health workers! Form rank-and-file committees to fight for decent wages and conditions!

Health Workers Rank-and-File Committee
10 July 2023

The Health Workers Rank-and-File Committee (HWRFC) urges public sector Health Services Union (HSU) members to vote “no” to the New South Wales (NSW) Labor government’s latest pay offer. The union-government deal is a deliberate attempt to turn one section of the membership against another, to allow Labor to carry out its austerity agenda.

An email sent to HSU members on Friday outlined the government’s offer, under which around 70,000 public health workers would receive “a flat $3,500 increase to all base pay rates of pay,” rather than a percentage rise, and a 0.5 percent increase to superannuation required by federal legislation.

The email also spelled out that “industrial action will be put on hold while members have time to examine and vote on the pay offer,” despite the fact that, at the HSU delegates’ conference last week, where the revised offer was outlined, delegates voted in favour of resuming strikes and work bans.

The flat-rate arrangement was proposed by the HSU at its delegates’ conference last week. Concerned that it would be unable to keep a lid on strong opposition among workers to Labor’s previous offer of a 4 percent pay rise (plus 0.5 percent super), the union leadership put the measure forward as a means for the government to avoid industrial unrest without spending an extra cent.

With inflation officially at 7 percent, this offer amounts to a real wage cut for all but the lowest-paid workers in the health sector. Workers currently earning more than $87,500, including allied health workers, paramedics and other professional staff, will receive nominal wage increases of even less than the 4 percent previously offered.

The HSU’s previously advanced call for a 6 percent pay rise, for which the union was never serious about advancing a fight, has been completely abandoned by the leadership.

The union’s support for the new deal also represents an almost total renunciation of its main slogan during recent industrial action, “Stop the Steal,” a call for 100 percent of tax benefits from salary packaging to be paid for workers, rather than the current 50 percent. The government is now offering just “50% to 60%,” with further increases promised at an indeterminate time in the future.

The divisive proposal plays on the fact that HSU density is higher among workers in lower-paid classifications. The union bureaucracy is seeking to turn these workers against their colleagues as a diversion from a struggle against the wage-slashing Labor government.

HSU NSW General Secretary Gerard Hayes spelled this out at the delegates’ conference, saying, under a percentage wage increase, “there’s a lot of [non-members] who are gonna get a lot out of what you’re doing … You’re having to fight, you’re on strike, you’re losing money.”

In fact, many health workers who *are* HSU members face substantial real wage cuts under this deal. Hayes acknowledged this on Friday, saying he was “asking some of our members … to do me a favour.” In reality, Hayes is attempting to force workers to make sacrifices as a “favour” to the Labor government.

The union’s post about the offer on Facebook was met with derision and anger from workers.

Meagan Miller wrote, “A big NO. A deal where 40% of YOUR MEMBERS are worse off. You have got to be kidding.”

Kris Berry added, “I am insulted by this. The offer for therapists who provide patient care seems to be less than the 4.5% recently offered. Whilst I support the cleaners security and admin staff to the nth degree, it is not fair for the union to ask professional staff to agree to accept less. … For the HSU to pit one set of workers against another is awful.”

Jo Phillips commented, “I can’t believe we actually paid Gerard Hayes to negotiate a worse deal for us than was originally offered. We actually paid him to take salary away from us.”

Mark Smith wrote, “This offer is another attempt at smoke and mirror solutions. $3500 sounds good until you actually

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look at it, for a large majority of HSU members it is well under the 4% increase [previously] offered."

The comments are an indication of broader opposition among workers to the deepening assault on wages and conditions by the state Labor government and the role of the union bureaucracy in attempting to enforce it.

Last year, amid the largest upsurge in strike activity by workers in Australia in more than a decade, with the most significant action occurring in the NSW public sector, the HSU, along with all other unions, diverted workers' struggles behind Labor's campaign for the state election.

While the government has promised to remove the public sector wage increase cap in September, it is deepening the slashing of real wages of health workers, teachers and all other state employees. Labor has made clear, both before the election and since, that even nominal pay rises must be tied to "productivity gains," meaning the destruction of jobs and conditions.

This is in line with the demand of the federal Labor government that working people must "make sacrifices" to reduce national debt and pay for militarism and war, by accepting below-inflation pay rises and the further destruction of healthcare, education and other social services.

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.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, Labor and the unions have spearheaded the homicidal "let it rip" policies which have brought the country's already underfunded and understaffed health system to its knees and caused more than 25,000 deaths. Hayes and the HSU were instrumental in this, being among the first to call for COVID-19 isolation rules to be scrapped, in line with the demands of big business.

The latest union-government wage offer is an escalation of these decades of betrayal. Labor and the HSU are seeking to establish a dangerous precedent in which large sections of workers are turned against one another to prevent opposition to government attacks on jobs, pay and conditions.

HSU members must oppose this unholy alliance and the attempt to drive a wedge between sections of workers. All workers, regardless of their individual qualifications and current salary, share the same interests and confront the same sharp rises in the cost of living.

Likewise, the division being imposed by the HSU weakens the entire working class, including the low-paid workers it claims will nominally benefit. The HSU itself is directly enforcing what is often done by governments and the corporations: divide and conquer. Workers cannot defend a single social right if they are pitted against one another and atomised in this manner. It plays straight into the hands of management.

Workers should also reject with contempt the strike ban unilaterally renewed by the union bureaucracy on Friday and demand an immediate resumption of industrial action, this time with full strike pay from the HSU.

The HWRFC urges HSU members to vote "no" to Labor's wage offer. But this is only the first step towards defeating this sellout operation. The heightened level of union-government collaboration exhibited by this deal makes clear that health workers cannot take forward their struggle within the stranglehold of the union apparatus.

To fight for real improvements to pay and conditions, health workers will need to establish new organisations of struggle, rank-and-file committees, as the only means through which workers can democratically discuss and develop a fight for demands based on their actual needs, not what governments or union bureaucrats say is affordable or possible.

Throughout the state, across the country and around the world, workers confront similar attacks on their pay and conditions. Through rank-and-file committees, NSW health workers can link up with broader sections of the working class, including nurses, midwives and other public sector workers, as well as sections of workers across the country and internationally.

This will provide the basis for a political struggle against Labor, the unions and all other representatives of the capitalist profit system, which is fundamentally incompatible with the basic social rights of ordinary people, including access to high-quality public healthcare, with decent pay and conditions for workers.

The situation itself poses the urgent need for a political perspective. In the midst of a global pandemic and a breakdown of the health system, big business, the governments and the unions are all trying to slash spending on healthcare! That demonstrates that this most basic and fundamental social service cannot be maintained, let alone developed, under the dictatorship of the banks and corporations. The alternative is the fight for socialism: the reorganisation of society, by the working class, to meet social need, not private profit.

The Health Workers Rank and File Committee will offer every assistance in this process. We urge health workers to contact us to discuss this perspective and the fight to build rank-and-file committees.

Contact the Health Workers Rank-and-File Committee:
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