

Australia: Health workers should reject union-government sellout and build rank-and-file committees to fight for a real pay rise!

Health Workers Rank-and-File Committee

17 July 2023

The Health Workers Rank-and-File Committee (HWRFC) urges Health Services Union (HSU) members to reject the New South Wales (NSW) Labor government's latest pay offer. The union-government deal is an attempt to turn workers against one other and impose real wage cuts across the public health workforce.

HSU members are being asked to vote on whether to accept one of two nominal wage rise proposals—a 4 percent increase, as the government has offered to other public sector workers, or a flat \$3,502 increase, regardless of current income—or to “reject both offers and take industrial action for more.”

Neither of the pay offers represents a way forward, even slightly. The 4 percent figure falls far short of the current inflation rate of 7 percent, itself a massive understatement of the real living costs faced by workers.

The \$3,502 flat increase would amount to a real wage cut for all but the lowest-paid workers in the health sector. Only full-time workers currently earning less than \$50,000 per annum will receive a pay rise above inflation. Workers now earning more than \$87,550, including allied health workers, paramedics and other professional staff, will get less than the initial 4 percent offer.

This arrangement is designed to ensure that the NSW Labor government, which was heavily promoted by the unions ahead of the March election as a panacea for the dire wages and conditions confronted by public sector workers, does not have to pay one cent more than its original pitiful offer.

It was put forward by the HSU leadership in response to workers' opposition to the 4 percent offer and anger towards Labor, in an attempt to shut down any possibility of limited industrial action escalating towards a broader struggle against the state government.

The proposal was deliberately engineered to extract a meagre pay rise for lower-paid workers from other union members who enjoy marginally better rates of pay. These workers' support for the interests of their highly exploited colleagues has been weaponised against them.

The HSU's actions threaten to establish a dangerous precedent, not just for health workers but for the entire public

sector and the working class more broadly, in which large sections of workers are turned against one another to prevent opposition to government attacks on jobs, pay and conditions.

Neither pay offer is acceptable. Workers should reject both in the union ballot and vote to continue industrial action, but this third option, which under the leadership of the HSU bureaucracy will mean resuming a campaign that has been strangled by the union apparatus since it began, represents nothing more than a temporary stay of execution.

This poses the urgent need for workers to take control of their own struggle, through the formation of rank-and-file committees throughout hospitals and other health services. Through these committees workers can democratically discuss their situation and formulate their own demands and plan an offensive to fight for them.

The necessity of a real pay rise for health workers, well above inflation, is undeniable. But workers should not limit their demands to wages and related conditions. Rank-and-file committees are the only means through which health workers can fight to build a public health system that provides the highest standard of care.

Since the first industrial action in this dispute was called by the HSU in May, it has been restricted to limited work bans, work-to-rule actions and a handful of sporadic and isolated stoppages, mostly confined to individual hospitals. While workers have repeatedly voted to continue the campaign, the union leadership has called off all action since June 23.

The union's meagre initial demand for a 6 percent nominal pay increase has been completely abandoned. Having previously called for workers to receive 100 percent of salary packaging tax benefits, the HSU is now asking workers to accept the government offer of 60 percent.

This is because the union is tied by a thousand threads to the Labor government and supports the entire framework of cuts to jobs, wages, conditions and harsh cuts to all forms of social spending, including on the public health system. A return to industrial action under this leadership will only lead to betrayal.

The HSU is not even pretending to mobilise workers to improve the dire state of the public health system, instead

promoting illusions that the crisis can be resolved through yet another Royal Commission and without any additional funding from the government.

In fact, the long delays and overcrowding faced by patients, along with the chronic understaffing and overwork confronting health workers, are the product of decades of funding cuts by state and federal governments, Labor and Liberal-National, enforced at every stage by the HSU and other health unions.

Throughout the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the profit-driven “let it rip” policies adopted by all governments have brought hospitals to breaking point and beyond, and placed health workers and patients at constant risk of infection, illness and death. In Victoria, at least 659 people have died after contracting the virus in hospital, one in eight of patients who did so. While equivalent figures have not been released in NSW—and the unions have done nothing to uncover them—it is likely they would tell a similar story.

The experience of recent years had demonstrated that a functional public health system is an impossibility while a deadly and highly infectious virus is allowed to spread freely throughout the population. But capitalist governments, under which everything including the health and lives of ordinary people is subordinated to the profit interests of the wealthy elite, have vowed never again to implement even the most basic public health measures to stop transmission.

The HSU has played a critical role in supporting this murderous operation, being among the first to call for COVID-19 isolation rules to be scrapped, in line with the demands of big business.

Health workers cannot possibly take forward a fight for improved wages and conditions within the framework of a bureaucracy that has deliberately advocated for policies that place their lives at risk every day.

The first task of a rank-and-file committee would be to demand the immediate resumption of industrial action, this time with full strike pay from the HSU. This action must be developed into a fight for demands based on workers’ actual needs. The HWRFC proposes the following as a starting point:

- An immediate increase to all pay by 20 percent to compensate for decades of real-wage cuts, with automatic monthly cost of living adjustments to keep pace with rising expenses.
- 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. All decisions on safety must be made by workers, not management and governments.
- Immediate hiring of thousands of health workers to end chronic understaffing and punishing workloads, which also risk patient safety.
- Permanent full-time jobs for all health workers who want them.
- Massively expand spending on public health. End the

privatisation of essential social services.

Such demands are not “unrealistic.” These are necessary to allow health workers to provide for themselves and their families, and to ensure safety in the workplace for staff and their patients. There are more than enough resources to fund these measures, but they are currently in the possession and control of a tiny wealthy elite.

Winning these demands will require a political fight against Labor, the unions and all other defenders of capitalism, who will insist there is “no money” to pay health workers a decent wage, even as billions of dollars are allotted to the war machine and tax cuts for the wealthy.

To take this struggle forward, health workers covered by the HSU will need to link up with others who confront similar attacks. This includes the tens of thousands of public-sector nurses and midwives who have also been offered a 4 percent pay “rise” by the NSW government.

While these two sections of workers work side-by-side every day, the HSU and Nurses and Midwives Association do everything possible to prevent a unified struggle. Through rank-and-file committees, workers can break this isolation.

A broad mobilisation of workers is essential, but to take forward the fight for real improvements to wages and conditions, a new political perspective is required. It is only through a fight for workers’ governments to implement socialist policies. Hospitals and other vital infrastructure, along with the major corporations and banks, must be placed under democratic workers’ control and ownership to make available the resources necessary for a high-quality free public health system, with decent pay and conditions for workers.

We urge health workers to contact the HWRFC today to discuss forming a rank-and-file committee at your workplace.

Contact the Health Workers Rank-and-File Committee:

Email: sephw.aus@gmail.com

Twitter: @HealthRandF_Aus

Facebook: [facebook.com/groups/hwrffcaus](https://www.facebook.com/groups/hwrffcaus)



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)