

Australian health workers committee votes for active boycott of Voice referendum

Our reporters

21 September 2023

The Health Workers Rank-and-File Committee (HWRFC) met online on Wednesday night and unanimously passed a resolution backing the Socialist Equality Party's call for an active boycott of the October 14 referendum for a Voice to the Australian parliament.

The meeting was attended by a cross section of health workers—a specialist doctor, a medical records worker, nurses, aged care and mental health workers, pathology and hospital services workers, and a medical scientist. Their vote provides a powerful lead to health workers and others seeking an independent and socialist alternative to the racist policies of the Yes and No camps and their pro-capitalist agendas of austerity and war.

HWRFC convenor Julia Thomas introduced the resolution. She cited extensively from the Socialist Equality Party statement: "For an active boycott of Australian Labor's Voice referendum!"

She said that health workers are "acutely aware that the crisis in healthcare afflicting Aboriginal workers and other working-class communities is the result of endemic poverty, lack of adequate public health care and staff shortages caused by grossly inadequate government funding."

The social oppression of Aboriginal communities, she said, was a class question. The referendum would not address the past crimes of Australian capitalism or overcome the appalling conditions faced by indigenous people.

Thomas contrasted the massive amounts allocated by the Albanese Labor government for war and military spending with the billions of dollars of cuts to public healthcare. "With the full support of the trade unions, federal and state governments have adopted a homicidal 'let it rip' COVID-19 agenda that has resulted in an unending wave of infections and deaths in the working class, including in indigenous communities," she said.

Thomas reviewed the experience during the early stages of the pandemic in Enngonia, a remote town near Bourke in north-western New South Wales. It has a large Aboriginal population.

"The town was locked down after the discovery of COVID-19 infections, but residents weren't being provided with food or medicines by the government. A family had to establish a GoFundMe page to raise money for food. The notion that the government doesn't know the dire conditions facing indigenous people or what could be done to improve this is a lie," Thomas said.

"The Voice will no more address the social disaster facing

indigenous workers and youth than previous measures by Labor governments, from the creation of land rights to the parliamentary apologies for the 'Stolen Generations' and the 'Close the Gap' program. In fact, the latest 'Closing the Gap' report, released at the end of last year by the federal Labor government, revealed a worsening economic and social crisis among Aboriginal workers and youth," she said.

Thomas explained that the Voice idea originated in 2015 with right-wing lawyer and anti-welfare advocate Noel Pearson and other hand-picked indigenous elite figures in 2015, working in partnership with the then Liberal-National government of Tony Abbott.

"It was," she said, "an effort to divert the ongoing anger and disaffection among ordinary indigenous people, and the working class more broadly, over the escalating attacks on living and working conditions. The new unelected institution would be part of the same capitalist state apparatus that has been directly responsible for the destruction of Aboriginal society and the incorporation of most indigenous people into the working class as one of its most oppressed layers."

Thomas explained that the call for an active boycott by the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) was to expose and oppose the referendum. She concluded: "This is not passive abstention but a form of collective action to advance the independent interests of the working class. That is essential to prepare for the momentous class struggles ahead—regardless of whether the referendum passes or fails—against the agenda of war and austerity."

Following this report there was extended discussion on a range of issues. Several attendees reviewed the appalling social conditions facing Aboriginal communities, explaining that they were a product of the profit system and could only be resolved by a unified movement of the working class. Others reviewed the pro-business policies of Aboriginal leaders, such as Noel Pearson and Marcia Langton.

An aged care worker told the meeting the Voice would not alleviate the shocking conditions facing Aborigines living in remote communities or urban Aboriginal workers but simply create another unelected layer of bureaucrats.

He reviewed the grossly inadequate provision of basic social services—water, electricity, telecommunications, health and education—to remote communities and the appalling health outcomes.

"If there's going to be any solution to this crisis it will have to

come from below with workers taking matters into their hands on a socialist program,” he said.

A respiratory specialist from New South Wales told the meeting that lung disease was endemic amongst Aboriginal people but services in many areas were virtually non-existent.

“Nothing is being explained in this referendum campaign for the Voice about how these health and other social problems are going to be overcome,” he said.

“The referendum is being used to promote racial divisions and cover up the preparations for war abroad and class war against the working class at home. This is a political technique that has been used many times before,” he added.

A Melbourne medical records worker indicated in the meeting chat that she did not believe the Voice would benefit the majority of Aboriginal people or any other workers. She wrote in the chat that she had grown up in a remote town in Western Australia and that these communities were always neglected by all governments.

The HWRFC urges health workers across Australia to support its resolution printed below, share with fellow workers and on social media and contact us:

Email: sephw.aus@gmail.com

Twitter: @HealthRandF_Aus

We also call on health workers to attend the Socialist Equality Party’s public meeting at 2 p.m. (AEDT) on Sunday, October 1, in Community Room 2, Bryan Brown Theatre, 80 Rickard St, Bankstown, Sydney. The SEP meeting will also be livestreamed. Register now to attend in person or online!

Health Workers Rank-and-File Committee Resolution Wednesday September 20, 2023

This meeting of the Health Workers Rank-and-File Committee (HWRFC) in Australia rejects both the Yes and No camps in the October 14 referendum for a Voice to parliament and endorses the Socialist Equality Party’s call for an active boycott of this anti-democratic process.

The referendum does not provide workers and youth in Australia with a “say” and irrespective of the result, will not resolve or overcome the decades of social oppression suffered by the majority of Aboriginal people. It will no more address the social disaster facing indigenous workers and youth than the previous supposedly “progressive” measures spearheaded by Labor governments, from the creation of land rights to the parliamentary apologies for the “Stolen Generations” and the “Close the Gap” program.

The real purpose of the referendum is to cover up the escalating social attacks on the working class and create the illusion of “national unity” as the Australian government increases its involvement in the escalating war against Russia in Ukraine, and fully commits to a US-led war against China that would threaten the very existence of humanity.

War abroad will be paid for by war at home against every section of the working class, with brutal attacks on public health and education and other vital social services. No referendum has been conducted to give the working class a “say” on the drive to war, the AUKUS military pact or \$368 billion for nuclear-powered attack submarines and billions more for other military hardware.

Contrary to the claims of the Yes and No camps, the fundamental division in society is not race but class. The appalling poverty facing Aboriginal workers and youth is a sharp expression of the worsening conditions facing the working class as a whole and a product of the capitalist system.

Health workers are acutely aware that the chronic diseases afflicting Aboriginal workers and other working-class communities are the result of endemic poverty, lack of adequate public health care and staff shortages caused by grossly inadequate government funding. The universal adoption of “let it rip” COVID-19 policies by governments, backed by the health unions, and the unnecessary death of millions, follow banking and big business demands that profits must take precedence over human life.

The HWRFC urges health workers to support the Socialist Equality Party’s active boycott because it asserts the need for a unified independent political movement of the working class against every faction of the political establishment. As the SEP “For an Active Boycott of Labor’s Voice Referendum” states:

“The struggle to end the oppression of Aborigines, and the struggle for the social rights of the working class, are one and the same. They require a unified movement of the working class, regardless of race, gender and sexuality, against the capitalist profit system itself. This means the fight for socialism, placing society’s resources under public ownership and democratic workers’ control, thereby guaranteeing the right of all to free education, health care and all the fundamental necessities of modern life.”

Note: Under conditions of compulsory voting, which makes it a crime to urge a boycott of the vote itself, the SEP calls on workers and youth to register their opposition by casting informal ballots and join our active boycott campaign in the lead-up to October 14, that goes well beyond the individual act of voting.

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To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact