

Australia: 54-year-old man dies in Adelaide after waiting ten hours for ambulance

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On December 27, a 54-year-old disability care resident known as Eddie died after waiting ten hours for an ambulance in Adelaide, South Australia (SA). This reflects the deepening crisis of the public health system, devastated by decades of funding cuts, and exacerbated by the ongoing coronavirus pandemic.

The Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) reported that three calls were made to emergency services on behalf of Eddie, who was experiencing abdominal pain and vomiting. He was initially triaged as “Urgent Priority 5,” which required an ambulance to attend within an hour. By the third call, nearly ten hours later, this was upgraded to “Priority 1,” but by the time an ambulance arrived, Eddie was dead.

That night, a Code White was declared, with public hospital emergency departments across Adelaide overwhelmed and ambulances unable to unload patients. A video posted on the Ambulance Employees Association (AEA) Facebook page showed more than ten ambulances ramped outside Royal Adelaide Hospital.

Speaking to the media, Eddie’s uncle said, “He couldn’t talk, so he just had to suffer while calls were made and he just didn’t make it... He was in immense pain, I can only imagine, he must have been feeling like he was going through hell.”

Eddie’s aunt, Brenda, pointed the finger of blame at Premier Peter Malinauskas and the Labor government.

She said, “Mr Malinauskas, you promised South Australia that you were going to fix the ramping—you have failed. Eddie is another statistic and we want to be here today to make somebody responsible... We do not want another family to go through what we’ve gone through. We don’t want any more deaths.”

Coming into office in March 2022, having run an election campaign focussed on the disastrous state of the public health system under the state Liberal government, the Malinauskas Labor government has since presided

over record levels of ambulance ramping, reflecting a shortage of hospital beds and resources.

The government has announced funding for 550 more hospital beds across the state, however, in a recent press release it revealed just 150 additional public hospital beds would be opened this year.

A recent Australian Medical Association report card covering data from 2021?22 showed that South Australia had the lowest percentage of patients transferred from ambulances within 30 minutes in the country. Just 42.9 percent were transferred within the recommended time, a 14.5 percent deterioration from the previous year, followed by Queensland (58.7 percent) and Western Australia (63 percent).

The AEA, along with the other trade unions, promoted the election of a Labor government in 2022 as a panacea. The union has since sought to defend Labor’s role in the deepening crisis.

In a Facebook post in April 2023, the AEA wrote they were, “disappointed to see the hours lost to ramping increase over March 2023 to almost 4,000 hours in a single month, equivalent to 11 ambulances crews ramped each day for their entire shift.”

However, the union claimed, “There is still a strong commitment from Government, SA Health and SA Ambulance Service to explore every possible way to reduce ramping... Lack of capacity remains the primary driver for ramping and we are reassured that of the 550 additional beds committed these are being brought online as quickly as possible.”

In November 2023, the worst month on record for ambulance ramping in the state, the AEA merely stated they welcomed “the additional 150 hospital beds opening within the next 12 months,” and “continue to call for measures designed to release ambulances from the ramp to respond to patients stranded in the community with life threatening emergencies.”

The dire conditions in healthcare in South Australia are part of a broader crisis of healthcare across the country, with reports of increased ambulance ramping, growing emergency department wait times, bed shortages and understaffing in every state and territory.

In November, 67-year-old Queensland tank cleaner Wayne Irving died after waiting three hours in the back of an ambulance outside Ipswich Hospital. He is believed to have suffered a fatal heart attack as he was eventually being transferred from the stretcher to a hospital bed. ABC News reported the first responders at the hospital escalated his condition five times to no avail.

Wayne's daughter, Lauren Hansford, said her family had lost faith in the health system: "It's failing us, it's failing everyone around us... When you put a loved one in an ambulance, you expect them to... get the treatment they deserve. I wish I had picked him up in my car and taken him to our local doctors and nurses."

The deadly delay of treatment is the result of an acute shortage of hospital staff and resources, caused by the deliberate gutting of public healthcare by successive Labor and Liberal-National governments, state, territory and federal.

These cuts have been deepened by the federal Labor government of Anthony Albanese, whose latest budget slashed \$11 billion from the health system over two years, part of a broader assault on wages and vital services for the working class. In stark contrast, increasingly vast sums have been allocated to military expansion, including \$368 billion for nuclear-powered submarines, in preparation for a US-led war against China.

This has been enforced at every turn by the health unions, which have imposed one wage-slashing enterprise agreement or state award after another, and prevented any struggle by workers against decades of cost-cutting and privatisation.

Earlier this month, the Australian Nursing Federation struck a backroom deal with the Western Australian Labor government that will slash the real wages of public sector nurses and midwives across the state.

In December, the NSW Labor government and the Health Services Union jointly announced a deal that will award paramedics in the state nominal pay increases of between 11 and 29 percent over four years. It represents a real wage cut for many workers and only a marginal increase for others, that does nothing to make up for losses in previous union-government agreements.

The union-government agreement was rushed through to defuse a registration boycott by paramedics, that would

have left much of the state without ambulance cover.

Despite the promises of union and Labor officials, neither of these deals, nor any of those imposed on health workers by the unions in recent months and years, have done or will do anything to address the chronic shortages of funding, resources and staff common to all public hospitals and health facilities.

Health workers must take matters into their own hands to address these issues. The formation of rank-and-file committees, politically independent of the unions and Labor, is essential to developing and taking forward health workers' demands.

But this struggle cannot be limited to wages and conditions alone. A high-quality public health system, staffed by well-paid workers with decent working conditions, is fundamentally incompatible with the capitalist system, under which all social needs, including health and life itself, are subordinated to the profit demands of big business.

This has been starkly exposed in the COVID-19 pandemic, in which the conscious pro-business decisions of all capitalist governments, to dispense with even the most basic public health measures against the virus, have caused more than 27 million deaths worldwide.

Australia is no exception. With union-backed Labor governments leading the charge, the homicidal "let it rip" program has caused almost 24,000 deaths, according to official figures that likely fall far short of the true toll.

Addressing the dire conditions in the public health system is impossible without a fight to eliminate COVID-19, which continues to exacerbate the crisis through additional patient load and staff illness.

This poses the need for an alternative political perspective, socialism, and the fight to establish workers' governments and bring hospitals and emergency services, along with the major banks and corporations, under democratic workers' control. Only in this way can the immense resources currently monopolised by the wealthy elite be freed up to provide for the needs of the working class.



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