

Australia: Victorian nurses and midwives vote for strikes against Labor government wage cuts

Margaret Rees
3 May 2024

Nurses and midwives throughout Victoria face the prospect of another four years of real wage cuts, as the state Labor government of Jacinta Allan seeks to impose the burden of its financial crisis upon public sector workers.

Health workers have expressed their clear determination to fight this, voting overwhelmingly in favour of industrial action including work stoppages of up to four hours. In a protected action ballot, which closed on Monday, 98 percent of the more than 50,000 nurses and midwives in public health services who participated recorded a “yes” vote.

This follows the unanimous rejection on March 21 of Labor’s nominal pay increase offer of 3 percent per annum, plus a lump sum payment of 0.5 percent. With official inflation at 3.6 percent, and the real cost of living rising even more sharply, this represents a substantial pay cut in real terms.

But the Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation (ANMF) is seeking to ensure that industrial action against this real wage cut proceeds on the most limited basis. The purpose is to allow frustrated nurses and midwives to let off steam before the union bureaucracy pushes through a sell-out enterprise agreement that delivers the Labor government everything it demands.

At a statewide meeting on Tuesday, the ANMF leadership outlined the set of work bans and other token measures that it will undertake from May 7: Wearing campaign T-shirts, refusal to be redeployed, refusal to provide information about who is taking industrial action, writing campaign messages on vehicles, not doing administrative paperwork or data entry, including ambulance offload times, speaking to media and patients about their campaign, and closing beds if

staffing is not maintained.

Members at the meeting also voted to approve “Stage 2” actions to commence on May 17, including closing one in four beds, reserving emergency admission beds, and stop-work meetings. But these actions will not proceed until after the ANMF bureaucracy engages in further back-room negotiations with the Labor government, and only if there is not a revised offer that the union leadership deems “can be recommended to members.”

The question of what sort of offer the ANMF bureaucracy will “recommend” is therefore central. In what should stand as a stark warning for workers, the union has not advanced a pay demand figure, signalling it will abide by the government’s punitive Wage Policy framework, which demands that “all agreements must be fiscally sustainable and funded from indexation, revenue, appropriate cost offsets or a Government approved funding strategy.”

This mealy-mouthed approach was continued at Tuesday’s meeting, where the only resolution on wages was to “note that reasonable and fair adjustment to wages, allowances and initiatives that will retain, and rebuild a permanent experienced and skilled workforce are yet to be resolved.”

The ANMF bureaucracy’s determination of what constitutes a “reasonable and fair adjustment to wages, allowances and initiatives” is meaningless, under conditions where it has already committed to enforce Labor’s Wage Policy.

The union has also made clear that the critical issue of ratios is not up for discussion. The first page of its log of claims notes that “nurse/midwife patient ratios are not included in the EBA.”

As for the appeal for the rebuilding of a permanent workforce, what the ANMF bureaucracy means by this is contained in the media release that the union issued following the statewide meeting. ANMF branch secretary Lisa Fitzpatrick noted that “Department of Health data shows health services spent \$291 million on overtime and agency and casual nurses and midwives in 2023.”

In other words, Fitzpatrick is offering financial advice to Labor on how best to slash health spending in its May 7 budget.

The reliance on overtime and agency nurses throughout hospitals and health centres is the product of the deep-seated crisis within the public health system, which the COVID-19 pandemic has only brought more sharply to the surface. This is the result of decades of funding cuts and privatisation, overseen and enforced by the union bureaucracy.

The most recent manifestation of this was the ANMF’s eight-year pay deal with the Andrews Labor government in 2016, which meant nominal wage rises were locked at 3 percent, even as inflation rose to nearly 8 percent in 2022.

What the ANMF effectively did with the eight-year deal was underwrite the Victorian Labor government’s program of privatisation through Public Private Partnerships and handouts to infrastructure corporations and money markets, by freezing the wages of a key section of the public sector workforce.

Now, the ANMF is attempting to repeat this exercise, while posturing as the champion of the fight of the nurses and midwives against the Victorian Hospitals’ Industry Association and the Labor government.

The attack on the real wages of Victorian nurses and midwives is part of a broader assault on the working class that is being carried out by Labor at the state, territory and federal levels.

Around the country, one sub-inflationary pay “rise” after another, in health, education and throughout the public sector, has been imposed by Labor governments, with the total complicity of all the trade unions.

To advance their fight for wages and conditions, nurses and midwives will have to take up a political struggle against the Labor government. This is impossible within the framework of the ANMF bureaucracy, which is tied to Labor by a thousand threads.

What is required is new organisations of struggle, rank-and-file committees in every hospital and community health centre, democratically controlled by workers themselves and politically independent of the ANMF.

Through such committees, health workers can discuss demands based on their needs, not what the Labor government and the union leadership say is affordable.

These should not be limited to the immediate question of wages and conditions, but should encompass a fight against privatisation and for a public health system of the highest quality, freely accessible to all.

To fight for these demands, nurses and midwives will need to turn to broader layers of workers throughout the health sector and beyond, not just in Victoria, but across the country and around the world, where workers all confront similar attacks.

This includes nurses and midwives in New South Wales, where the union bureaucracy yesterday opposed a motion by workers demanding a fight for a 30 percent pay increase.

Ultimately, what is required is a fight for a socialist alternative to capitalism, under which even the most basic public needs, including health care and decent wages, are subordinated to the profit demands of the wealthy elite.

The banks and major corporations must be placed under public ownership and democratic workers’ control to free up the resources required for public health in a complex mass society.

Only the Health Workers Rank-and-File Committee is fighting for this perspective. We urge health workers to contact us today.

Contact the Health Workers Rank-and-File Committee:

Email: sephw.aus@gmail.com

Twitter: [@HealthRandF_Aus](https://twitter.com/HealthRandF_Aus)

Facebook: facebook.com/groups/hwrfcaus



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact