

Pathology workers have rejected Australian Clinical Laboratories' wage cut—a new strategy is needed!

Pathology Workers Rank-and File Committee
19 February 2025

Pathology workers' overwhelming rejection in Victoria of the latest enterprise agreement offer from Australian Clinical Laboratories (ACL) on January 31 is a clear indication of their determination to fight the corporate giant's ongoing attacks on wages, working conditions and staffing levels.

This decision, and our subsequent vote for industrial action, is just the first step in our struggle for decent pay and conditions. This fight must, however, be based on a clear understanding that the Health Workers Union (HWU) will not mount a real campaign against the company's attacks.

ACL's offer, which covers around 700 pathology collectors, specimen reception workers, administrative staff, couriers, store persons, maintenance workers and cleaners, would have locked us into a wage deal with annual "increases" as low as 0.24 percent for many classifications.

This provocative response has been made under conditions where the previous agreement negotiated by the HWU in 2021 tied pathology workers to pay rises to just 2.24 percent per annum, while inflation climbed to 7.8 percent in 2022.

This means we need a substantial wage increase just to compensate for the previous cuts to our living standards and to contend with further increases in the cost of essential items, such as food, fuel, rents and mortgages.

Even though the previous agreement expired in June 2024, which meant our last wage increase was in July 2023, ACL has declared it will only backdate pay rises by three months, five months less than we are owed, leaving us even further out of pocket.

ACL, Australia's third largest pathology company employing nearly 5,000 people nationally, has raked in \$238 million profit over the last three years. Government policies have ensured the massive profits of private pathology corporations, particularly during the first years of the COVID pandemic. Meanwhile, ACL and other private pathology businesses have responded to the federal Labor government's \$356 million cuts to pathology testing rebates by imposing it on patients in the form of increased fees and

out of pocket costs.

On February 10, ACL CEO Darren McKee responded to our rejection of the company's "offer" with a threatening letter to all employees.

McKee's letter denounces us for voting down what he describes as a "balanced and financially responsible" offer and says that the company would have to consider closing collection centres and reducing services, eliminating jobs and other cost-cutting measures, to "find additional money" for wages.

In a desperate attempt to bully us into accepting another offer, McKee says we must tell our bargaining representatives that we support a "balanced" deal. In other words, a similar offer to what we have already rejected.

Pathology workers should not take McKee's letter as an idle threat. Having failed in its machinations in the Fair Work Commission, such as disputing the wording of the union's application for industrial action and other manoeuvres, the company is again trying to bully us into accepting sub-standard wages, the continuation of existing heavy workloads, and unsafe and exploitative conditions.

ACL workers, like other health workers across Australia, made huge sacrifices to keep the healthcare system running during the peak periods of the COVID-19 pandemic. While the elimination of basic COVID-19 safety measures began under the previous Liberal-National coalition, the Albanese Labor government abolished them entirely, resulting in at least an additional 17,000 deaths since the May 2022 election.

Working on the front line, many of us caught the virus, endangering ourselves and our families, and some contracted Long Covid. Despite the ongoing presence of COVID-19 and other infectious diseases, ACL has failed to implement proper safety measures for staff and patients.

Many ACL collection centres are badly designed and poorly ventilated with workers forced into repetitive, physically damaging work with little regard for long-term

health impacts. Many of us conducting urine drug tests are often required to be in the same room with patients—whether male or female. This places us in vulnerable situations and increases the risk of harassment or violence.

The HWU has not lifted a finger to demand that ACL rectify these unsafe and dangerous conditions.

Reacting to workers' hostility to the company's pay offer, the HWU called a strike on February 24, which it began advertising before a protected action ballot to authorise the stoppage was even completed by workers, let alone approved by the Fair Work Commission.

Aside from potentially confusing workers, this premature act creates the conditions for the action to be deemed "unprotected" and shut down. Whether the strike goes ahead therefore remains to be seen.

The union has not held any workplace meetings to allow workers to discuss our demands and deliberately isolated each section of the workforce from the others. The HWU leadership has not even clearly explained to members what pay rise claim it is advancing in its backroom negotiations with management, let alone providing the full details of those discussions.

As long as the HWU bureaucracy is in charge, we will be in this dispute with our hands tied behind our backs, while the union negotiates and imposes another sell-out company deal.

Pathology workers need to take matters into their own hands. For that we require new democratic forms of organisation.

Rank-and-file committees, independent of the union bureaucracy, which is tied by a thousand threads to the big-business Labor Party apparatus, need to be established in every workplace. Such committees will be forums for the dissemination of information, discussion and debate and to link up with other workers in pathology and across the whole health industry.

As a starting point we propose these initial demands:

- An immediate 30 percent pay increase to compensate for past losses. All future pay rises linked to inflation, with a monthly cost-of-living adjustment to prevent workers from falling behind.

- Safe workplaces with proper security, ergonomic protections and full infection control measures.

- No job cuts and an end to understaffing. We need more workers, reduced workloads and full job security.

- An end to corporate control over pathology! Reverse the privatisation of pathology services, which must be fully funded and freely available to all.

No more secret union-management negotiations! The rank-and-file must be privy to all negotiations and discussions affecting us and have democratic control over them.

Pathology workers and their brothers and sisters throughout the health sector all face an attack on their jobs, wages and conditions spearheaded by Labor governments at the state and federal level, with the collaboration of the HWU and other health unions. The root cause of the escalating crisis in health is the capitalist system, where profits take precedence over the health and lives of ordinary people.

Our struggle for real wage increases, a safe work environment and a decent standard of living is inseparably linked to the fight for a high-quality public health system, freely accessible for all.

This requires a fight for a socialist perspective. Hospitals and other vital public infrastructure, along with the major corporations and banks, must be placed under full public ownership and democratic control of the working class. Only in this way can society's resources be employed to fulfil the needs of the entire working class, not further the profit interests of the wealthy few.

Workers of ACL, across the pathology sector and the entire public health system, unite! Fight for a future where healthcare serves the public, not corporate profits! We urge ACL pathology workers to get in touch with the Health Workers' Rank-and-File Committee today to discuss this perspective and how to start building a rank-and-file committee in your own workplace.

Contact the Health Workers' Rank-and-File Committee (HWRFC):

Email: sephw.aus@gmail.com

Twitter: @HealthRandF_Aus

Facebook: facebook.com/groups/hwrfcaus



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact