

Pathology workers at Australian Clinical Labs vote for industrial action

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25 February 2025

Pathology workers at Australian Clinical Laboratories (ACL) in Victoria voted overwhelmingly in a ballot ending February 20 to take protected industrial action against the company's enterprise agreement offer that cuts real wages.

The company's latest proposal, rejected last month, contained annual wage "increases" as low as 0.24 percent for many classifications. This is far less than the official inflation rate of 2.4 percent, itself a major understatement of the soaring cost of living for working people. Moreover, the previous union-management agreement, brokered in 2021, tied workers to wage rises of just 2.24 percent per annum, while inflation climbed to 7.8 percent in 2022.

Only 205 of the around 700 workers covered by the agreement are Health Workers Union (HWU) members and were eligible to vote in the protected action ballot. Of those, 151 filled in the ballot, with almost all voting in favour of various proposed forms of industrial action, ranging from stoppages of up to 24 hours to limited work bans.

Since the successful vote, the HWU has given workers no indication if, when or what action will be called. No meetings have been called to inform workers of what is planned, let alone allow them to discuss the way forward. Workers have not even been told what demands the union is advancing in bargaining negotiations with the company.

Compounding workers' confusion and uncertainty, the union is still advertising on social media a February 24 strike that did not take place. This action was called on February 4, before the vote to authorise it had even begun, raising questions over whether it would ever have proceeded.

The union bureaucracy's immediate response to last week's near-unanimous vote to strike was to tell workers, "it is VERY important that members take no actions without HWU's approval."

That is, the HWU leadership's overriding concern is that workers' opposition to the company's rotten offer remains under its grip.

Meanwhile, ACL responded to the strike vote with stepped-up threats against workers' jobs and conditions. On February 21, the company issued a memorandum stating that "potential opportunities for cost reduction and optimisation" had been identified. These ranged from "a slight reduction in operating hours to complete closure of site(s)."

The memorandum noted there would be engagement with

"impacted individuals, and unions, in accordance with the current Enterprise Agreement at the appropriate time."

In other words, ACL's ability to slash rostered hours and shut down entire facilities is a product of clauses contained in previous sell-out deals imposed by the HWU bureaucracy, which will now play a central role in collaborating with management's cost-cutting and restructuring operation.

The HWU's response to the strike vote and silence in the face of management's escalating threats illustrates starkly that ACL workers cannot take their struggle forward within the framework of the union apparatus. Instead, they must do what the bureaucracy warned against and, along with management, fears most—begin to organise outside the constraints of the union.

Rank-and-file committees, independent of the union bureaucracy, must be built in every ACL workplace. They must be open to all ACL workers, including pathology collectors, specimen reception workers, administrative staff, couriers, store persons, maintenance workers, cleaners and others.

These committees will be forums for information, discussion and debate, and the means through which workers can prepare and put into action a struggle for demands based on their actual needs, not what management or the union says is affordable or possible. This must include a serious campaign of industrial action, as workers have voted for overwhelmingly.

The Pathology Workers Rank-and File Committee proposes these demands as a starting point:

- 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.

To fight for these demands, ACL workers will need to link up with other workers in pathology and across the entire health industry, who confront similar attacks.

A unified industrial and political fight is required, against the

private health corporations and also the state and federal Labor governments spearheading the assault on the health system, the entire public sector and the working class in general, as well as the unions that are facilitating these attacks.

Several ACL workers spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* about the financial pressures they face, the company's intimidation tactics, and the role of the union. Their names have been changed to protect them from victimisation.

Anne said: "When we are short staffed, often you don't find out until you get to work. Then the patients are upset. Why doesn't the company employ more staff?"

"The wages are just ridiculously low, considering the increase in the cost of everything over the years. Life is just a struggle. I personally have to keep dipping into my superannuation and I shouldn't have to do that. There are house payments, house insurance, car payments, car insurance, registration and everything that goes with living."

"It is really sickening that we work with a company that treats us as if we're nothing. We haven't had a raise for years and the cost of living has become ridiculous."

"Most of the time you can't contact anybody from the union. I pay union fees, I expect to be able to actually talk to my union rep. We haven't been able to get any information about what we're striking for, what we're asking for."

"Why aren't the union speaking to their members? Are they collaborating with management and not consulting us? We've had no consultation on our demands. I find that bizarre and I don't trust the union. In the past whenever I've asked for help or wanted somebody to come down, nobody has even got back to me."

Mary said workers faced "increases in patient volume, increased duties with paperwork and emails and so on."

She explained: "I have two phones to answer, there is sub-par personal safety, management overreach in the use of collection equipment and poor ergonomics for taller collectors. There is also the short staffing."

"The cost of living means I have contracted and revised my spending in a big way. My personal spending is at almost zero, I buy absolutely necessary items only. Cost of fuel means less ability to travel, which impacts family, friends and recreation. Health care visits are spread further out and I spend less money on energy and insurance than I did."

"The threats from management that we face—these bullying tactics have been used for every enterprise agreement, and they have gotten away with each time. Pathology workers have put up with low wages for a very long time, but can't get by on them anymore. Because the company has never had to give the staff a substantial pay rise, they never budget for it. Any extra revenue goes on payments for management and shareholders."

"To not have meetings I think this was a big letdown by the union. Face-to-face contact is important, with opportunities to ask for information and clarification on the enterprise agreement."

David said: "The vote for industrial action is a necessary step when workers feel they have exhausted all other avenues to achieve fair conditions. Given the rising cost of living and stagnant wage growth, it's understandable why employees are pushing for

better pay and conditions.

"Many of us have been working under severe strain—understaffing, burnout, and the lingering effects of COVID-19. The pandemic exposed how fragile the system is, yet instead of real improvements, we've been expected to do more with less."

"The last enterprise agreement's 2.24 percent yearly wage rise didn't even come close to keeping up with inflation. Essential costs like rent, groceries, and utilities have skyrocketed. I had to cut back on things I took once for granted—whether that's medical care, savings, or even just a decent quality of life. I can't buy everything on my weekly grocery list. I haven't been to the dentist for two years. I used to go once a year for a check-up and a clean."

"There's frustration with the union's handling of this. The lack of mass meetings and communication has left many feeling unheard. If workers are expected to fight for better conditions, the union should be leading that fight with full transparency and active engagement. Instead, they have become the barrier to workers advancing what they need."

"A 30 percent pay increase may sound ambitious, but it's not unreasonable when you factor in how much wages have lagged behind inflation. This isn't about getting ahead—it's about catching up. Other demands, like better staffing levels and working conditions, are just as crucial to preventing burnout and ensuring quality care."

"We're not alone in this struggle. Healthcare workers across the sector are facing similar pressures. Coordinating efforts with other sections of healthcare workers could strengthen our position in our mutual struggle to obtain a living wage."

"Public healthcare is stretched to the breaking point. Chronic underfunding, short staffing, and increasing workloads are pushing workers to their limits, which ultimately impacts patient care."

"It's disappointing that under a supposedly pro-worker [Labor] government, we're still seeing attacks on wages and conditions. It raises serious questions about whose interests they're really serving."



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