

# Australia: Victorian mental health workers strike against Labor government pay offer

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Eight hundred mental health workers rallied on June 17 at Melbourne's Victorian Trades Hall then marched to parliament, to oppose the state Labor government's latest enterprise bargaining agreement (EBA) offer. Workers came from hospitals across the city and elsewhere in Victoria to participate in the rally and march, the second time they have walked off the job in this dispute. Read comments from the striking workers here.

As is the case throughout the public health system, the state's mental health sector is in a deepening crisis. Chronic understaffing, lack of resources and low wages, due to decades of government funding cuts and a privatisation drive, have left many mental health workers burnt out and considering leaving the sector.

Now, the Labor government is seeking to impose a 3 percent per annum nominal pay rise for all non-nursing staff, which would effectively lock in another four years of real wage cuts. While the official inflation figure is currently 2.4 percent, the cost of living is rising far more rapidly for working-class households, driven by the soaring cost of housing, utilities and fuel.

At the rally, Paul Healey, state secretary of the Health and Community Services Union (HACSU), denounced the offer as "disgraceful," but did not put forward any specific wage demand.

The original log of claims, voted on by workers last year, has been completely tossed aside. It sought pay increases of at least 5 percent per annum in all classifications, with the additional demand that wages of allied health professionals in mental health be brought into parity with their general health counterparts, before applying the 5 percent increase.

The HACSU's abandonment of any concrete wage claim should be a stark warning to mental health workers of an impending sellout. The union bureaucracy is creating the conditions for even the tiniest improvement to the Labor government's offer to be declared a "victory."

The striking workers were also motivated by the dire conditions in the under-funded and over-stretched public mental health system. A 2021 Royal Commission made 65 recommendations to supposedly address the crisis, including increasing bed and staffing numbers and the adoption of a

"holistic" model, in which community care and multi-disciplinary teams are as important as acute hospital care. Despite promising at the time to implement all 65, the Victorian Labor government has systematically flouted the recommendations.

At the rally, Healey said, "if we want to change from a medical model to a holistic health model, we need the staff to do it."

Continuing the theme of plaintive demands to the Labor government, Lloyd Williams, national secretary of the Health Services Union, of which the HACSU is one branch, lamented, "Sadly, the Allan government has lost its way... They have a \$1.1 billion tax for mental health so I say, [Premier] Jacinta Allan, where's the funding for mental health?"

While Williams was ostensibly criticising the government, his statement that it had "lost its way" was an attempt to cover over Labor's real role, slashing real wages, conditions and funding throughout the health sector and more broadly. By painting this as a temporary mistake or deviation, Williams is seeking to foster illusions that the very government that is carrying out yet another attack on mental health staff can be gently persuaded to change its mind.

The tax Williams referred to has been levied on businesses with annual payroll of over \$10 million since 2022, purportedly to fund improvements in the mental health system. However, the government has provided no breakdown of how this revenue is spent, while reneging on numerous promised reforms.

Among these was a plan, contained in a Memorandum of Understanding that accompanied the previous 2020–2024 EBA, to create an additional 800 extra mental health positions. While workers at the rally carried placards asking after these 800 jobs, the HACSU speakers on the platform said nothing about the issue.

Their silence was because the bureaucrats are well aware that the Labor government has no intention of fulfilling this commitment and is instead seeking to impose even more aggressive cuts to wages and social spending, in order to force the working class to shoulder the burden of the state's ailing finances.

The HACSU and the Australian Nursing and Midwifery

Federation (ANMF), which also has members covered by this EBA, along with the other public sector unions, are tasked with suppressing opposition to this austerity agenda.

The ANMF, is already well advanced in fulfilling its side of imposing this EBA, having given its stamp of approval on March 28. This is thanks to a divisive union-government manoeuvre: Rather than the miserly 3 percent per annum offer, nurses covered by the agreement are set to receive a total pay rise of 26.5 percent over the four-year deal, in line with a deal pushed through last year for nurses and midwives in general health.

The ANMF bureaucracy claimed this was a “victory” and pushed through an informal “yes” vote, meaning its members would play no further part in the EBA dispute. This attempt to drive a wedge between nurses and other health staff was met with opposition, with some ANMF members resigning from the union in disgust.

One ANMF member who attended the March 28 meeting wrote on Facebook: “There was the distinct lack of solidarity with Allied Health. ANMF dismissed those concerns as not their remit. Yet even if you disregard the important concept of solidarity it is most certainly in all nurses interests that Allied Health are paid properly as having poorly paid professions doing near on identical roles in the community teams is a long term recipe for a race to the bottom in pay terms and conditions for all. Unless we all win, no one wins.”

Moreover, the four-year, 26.5 percent deal, while twice the figure offered to non-nursing staff, is itself woefully inadequate, as a result of real wage cuts imposed in previous union-government agreements. As was the case last year, when the ANMF rammed through an equivalent four-year, 28.4 percent deal for general health nurses and midwives, base pay rates in most classifications will remain lower in real terms than they were in 2019, until at least the final months of the four-year agreement.

The most substantial component of these offers arose from a process that was out of the Labor government’s control—a “work value case” before the Fair Work Commission (FWC), arguing that nurses and midwives have been systematically underpaid for many years. Only after it became clear that the FWC would order a pay increase did the Labor government agree to include the anticipated sum in the enterprise agreement proposal, and only then because the ANMF bureaucracy was desperate for a big headline figure it could sell to workers and head off mounting demands for strikes and other substantive industrial action.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* explained last year: “Lumping what amounts to reparations in with an annual pay rise, ostensibly meant to cover inflation and provide gradual increases in workers’ living standards, is a fraud.”

Far from offering an alternative perspective, the HACSU is attempting to replicate the same fraud, based on a similar FWC case, this time covering the Health Professionals and Support

Services (HPSS) Award.

The union leadership complained earlier this month, “The government does not accept the provisional decision of the HPSS Under Valuation decision. Even though this is a similar mechanism that was used for the general nurses.”

The unions, especially those covering health, aged care, disability and other low-paid sectors, are increasingly promoting these courtroom manoeuvres as the means through which workers can advance their struggles. This is because, under conditions of soaring living costs and mounting social unrest, the bureaucracies are eager to suppress even limited industrial action and strikes, which they fear could develop beyond their control.

Victorian mental health staff must not allow themselves to be dragged into this trap of appeals to the pro-business courts and the cost-cutting Labor government. New organisations of struggle are required: rank-and-file committees, controlled by workers themselves and politically and organisationally independent of the HACSU, ANMF or any other union apparatus.

Through such committees, mental health workers can link up with general nurses and midwives, paramedics, doctors and other health workers nationally and internationally, who face similar attacks on their already intolerable conditions. This will be the basis of a unified political struggle against the subordination of all human need, including for medical care, to the profit demands of the financial and corporate elite.

The alternative is the fight for socialism, under which vital public amenities including hospitals and other health services, as well as the banks and corporations, are placed under public ownership and democratic workers’ control, to free up the resources for top quality healthcare to be provided free-of-charge to all, with good wages and conditions for all workers.

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

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