

# Australian care workers rally nationally against attack on pay and conditions

Richard Phillips  
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The Australian Services Union (ASU) has called a “National Day of Action” this week to oppose big-business attacks on social, community, home care and disability service (SCHADS) workers. The lunchtime demonstrations will be held in Victoria, New South Wales, South Australia, Queensland, Western Australia and the Australian Capital Territory on October 23. Tasmanian workers will protest on October 22.

The ASU estimates that hundreds of workers in the 130,000-strong sector face drastic pay cuts under award restructuring measures proposed in April by the Fair Work Commission’s (FWC) “Gender Undervaluation—Priority Awards Review.”

The proposals are still under consideration, with scores of submissions from unions, employer groups and various welfare organisations.

The ASU says the FWC measures would push hundreds of workers to quit the sector, which provides broad-ranging forms of social assistance to the most vulnerable sections of the working class and the poor.

The union estimates that, already, two-thirds of SCHADS workers are currently required to perform tasks beyond their official grades and working hours.

This week’s protests are mainly being held outside the offices of the Australian Industry Group (AiG), the country’s dominant business lobby group.

AiG is calling for the FWC to implement deeper cuts than what is already proposed, including by eliminating “sleepover” rates and other working conditions. A sleepover penalty is paid to support workers who need to sleep in the same location as their clients for eight hours but are still required to provide care during this time if needed. AiG wants sleepovers reclassified as “breaks” between shifts.

In a clear attempt to intimidate SCHADS workers, AiG has responded to the planned protests with threats that the ASU and its officials could face fines and even jail time

over the actions.

In an October 15 submission to FWC, AiG claimed the union’s tactics were “chilling” and aimed at “coercing” AiG and employers into supporting the union’s position and pressuring the industrial court to change its recommendations.

“[T]he scheduled protests,” AiG claimed, could violate Section 676 of the Fair Work Act, which says it is an offence if “the person threatens, intimidates, coerces or prejudices another person ... because the other person has given, or proposes to give, information or documents to the FWC.”

The FWC began its “Gender Undervaluation” review of awards in 2024, incorporating SCHADS into its deliberations. The premise of the reviews is that the sole reason for the dire conditions faced by more than a million workers in health, disability, aged care and education is discrimination against the sectors’ predominantly female staff.

The ASU, as well as health, pharmacy and aged-care sector union bureaucracies, have seized upon this fraudulent claim as a means of cutting workers in those areas off from the broader working class.

Anxious to suppress workers’ demands for industrial action to improve wages and conditions, the ASU and other unions fostered illusions that the “Gender Undervaluation” review would redress long-standing pay inequities and working conditions.

The FWC has responded to the ASU’s criticism of its proposals by insisting that the wages of current employees will not be cut but maintained by “transitional protections.” These assurances are worthless, especially in the increasingly casualised and underfunded social welfare sector.

The FWC’s protections only apply to employees’ rates of pay at their current employer. Workers who change jobs or roles within the sector will be rehired at lower

rates by employers in the chronically underfunded and understaffed sector. AiG has called for even these limited “protections” to be scrapped.

Equally worthless are cynical statements made ahead of the May federal election by Murray Watt, then workplace relations minister, after the April release of the FWC’s proposals.

Watt claimed that a re-elected Labor government would be mindful of the ASU’s concerns and would not allow “the real wages of low-paid workers to go backwards.”

This was an outright lie. Around the country, Labor governments, working hand in glove with the trade unions, have systematically undermined “the real wages of low paid workers,” in public and private sectors alike.

At the state level, this attack has been carried out through punitive wage caps on health workers, educators and throughout the public sector.

Federally, it is expressed through the FWC’s miserly 3.5 percent increase to the national minimum wage and award rates, starting on July 1—an 85-cent increase in the hourly rate to \$24.95, or about \$948 a week. In accordance with the instructions of the federal Labor government, the industrial tribunal’s ruling ensured that around one quarter of Australian workers continue to earn less in real terms than in September 2020.

While the ASU bureaucracy denounces AiG and feigns “shock” that the FWC’s “Gender Undervaluation” is set to slash wages for care workers, its “National Day of Action” is little more than a media stunt.

The purpose of the protests is to dissipate the demands of ASU members and promote illusions that workers’ issues can be resolved by the FWC, albeit with a little extra persuasion from these token protests. Ultimately, the aim is to block a unified political and industrial struggle by SCHADS workers against the Labor government and its cost-cutting agenda.

This is why the ASU has not called a strike or made any appeal for Australian Workers Union, Health Services Union, Community and Public Sector Union or United Workers Union members covered by the SCHADS award to join this week’s protests.

While driving a wedge between workers in the care sector, the ASU bureaucracy is trying to drag workers into a class-collaborationist grouping with the bosses.

The union has established the “Skilled Respected Equal Alliance,” a coalition with charity service providers and “progressive” employers, claiming this will persuade the FWC to introduce an “equitable fit-for-purpose classification structure” and pressure the government to

provide “sustainable funding” of the sector.

This is a political trap designed to keep the strivings of SCHADS workers within the framework of the FWC, which is not, as the unions consistently claim, an independent arbiter, but an arm of the state. As the April proposals demonstrate, the industrial tribunal is not seeking to resolve the issues confronting care workers, but to deliver on the demands of big business.

Nor can Prime Minister Anthony Albanese’s Labor government be “pressured” to adequately fund social welfare. Under conditions of the worst cost of living crisis in decades, it will not waver from its massive tax cuts to big business and the wealthy and the allocation of billions of dollars to the military, including \$368 billion for nuclear-powered submarines and other weaponry in preparation for a US-led war against China.

To defend their jobs, wages and conditions, SCHADS workers need to recognise that they are in a political struggle against the Labor government, the pro-business FWC and the trade union apparatus.

To take forward their fight, SCHADS workers need to organise independently of the ASU. This means taking matters into their own hands by forming rank-and-file committees in every workplace to democratically discuss what they need, not what the FWC, the government and the unions say is “affordable.”

This should include immediate pay rises of at least 30 percent across the board for SCHADS workers, and a massive increase in funding for the sector to provide high quality care for all those who need it.

These necessary demands are inseparable from the fight for a socialist perspective and a workers’ government that places the banks and major corporations under public ownership and democratic workers’ control and invests billions of dollars in every area of social need.

ASU members and other welfare workers should discuss this perspective and contact the *World Socialist Web Site* for assistance in developing rank-and-file committees in their own workplaces.



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