

Australia: Union officials stop striking health workers speaking to SEP members at Melbourne rally

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Around 300 public health workers joined a rally in Melbourne on Tuesday January 20, as part of a statewide strike against the Victorian Labor government and its assault on the workforce, which includes orderlies, cleaners, kitchen staff, theatre technicians and administration staff.

Thousands of workers across the state walked off the job, in opposition to the government's offer of a 3.75 percent per annum pay "rise," which is not enough to cover current inflation, let alone make up for previous real wage cuts. Labor's proposed enterprise agreement would also do nothing to improve the dire conditions confronted by workers throughout the public health system.

The rally, however, was designed by the Health Workers Union (HWU) to let workers blow off steam and to divert their anger into appeals to the very government that is attacking their wages and conditions.

The demonstration was originally scheduled to occur outside the newly renovated and expanded Frankston Hospital in Melbourne's outer southeast, where the HWU proposed to "disrupt" the hospital's official opening by state Premier Jacinta Allan.

Victorian health workers have entirely warranted concerns about the Frankston redevelopment. Like other public hospital construction and expansion operations across the state, it has been carried out through a Public-Private Partnership arrangement, in which a consortium of major corporations will be contracted not only to carry out the building work, but provide ongoing facilities maintenance and other non-clinical services.

This longstanding policy of the Victorian Labor government effectively means the privatisation by stealth of swathes of the health workforce, prompting concerns over job and wage security. But the HWU's slogan, "BILLIONS for buildings. SCRAPS for the people inside them," is not a rallying cry against privatisation. It is a diversion, falsely counterposing the needs of health workers, for decent wages and conditions, to those of the working class as a whole, for

modern high-quality hospital infrastructure.

The HWU's promotion of the phoney conception that improved wages for health workers must be paid for through spending cuts elsewhere in the already inadequate health budget demonstrates their acceptance of, and agreement with, the whole framework of Labor's austerity agenda.

Primarily though, the Frankston rally was planned as a stunt to attract media attention and promote illusions among workers that what they are up against is not the Labor government's systematic assault on social spending and the public sector, but two rogue individuals, the premier and the health minister, Mary-Anne Thomas.

After it became clear that Allan had changed her plans and would not attend the Tuesday opening, the union announced, less than 24 hours before the rally, that it would be relocated to the Melbourne CBD, where strikers would march to the premier's office. The HWU's cynical and entirely unnecessary last-minute change of venue caused confusion among workers and prevented broader attendance.

Socialist Equality Party (SEP) members attended the rally to campaign for an alternative to the HWU's perspective of plaintive appeals for more behind-closed doors negotiations with the state government. SEP members raised the call for a turn to broader layers of the working class, who all confront an assault on their working conditions and living standards, spearheaded by the pro-business Labor government.

The presence of such a perspective was intolerable for the union bureaucracy. In a blatant attack on the democratic rights of their own members, HWU officials stepped in to break up discussions between striking workers and SEP campaigners.

Significantly, the union's attack on the SEP was led by its lead organiser, Jake McGuinness. He and a group of officials slandered the SEP as "scabs" who were "spreading division in the union." After pressuring workers to hand over the SEP's leaflets, McGuinness declared that the campaigners were not welcome at the rally and harassed them until they

moved away from the crowd.

The union leadership is terrified of any challenge to its subordination of the health workers' struggle to pressuring the Labor government, which is currently engaged in gutting public health. Rather than mounting a struggle against the Allan government, the HWU is seeking to block one from emerging, straitjacketing workers into impotent appeals to Labor and stunts like Tuesday's rally.

The HWU's attempt to exclude SEP members from the rally is the sharpest expression of this agenda. By attacking the SEP, the union bureaucracy is attacking the workers they claim to represent and their democratic right to have a discussion on how their fight must be directed.

The fact that the union resorts to utter lies, slandering the SEP as "scabs," demonstrates their weak position. Far from opposing the industrial action, the SEP calls for its expansion, to include other sections of workers and the preparation of a full-frontal assault on the Labor government and the capitalist system it represents. The political force that is seeking to undermine and restrict strikes by health workers is the thoroughly corporatised, Labor-aligned HWU bureaucracy.

The HWU's attempted censorship only highlights the importance of what the SEP was raising: To fight back against Labor's attack and avoid a sellout at the hands of the union bureaucracy, workers need to build rank-and-file committees, through which they can prepare and set into motion a plan based on their actual needs, not what the government or the union says is affordable or possible.

Speaking at the rally, McGuinness urged workers to "maintain your rage," insisting that, if they chanted loud enough, the state government could be pressured to "come to the table" and deliver better conditions for the understaffed and burnt-out workers.

The reality is that it is the previous deals brokered "at the table" between the HWU bureaucracy and Labor governments that have ensured that these workers are among the lowest-paid health employees in the country.

Last week's strike and another by these workers in December were the first called by the HWU in more than 25 years, reflecting an explosion of anger among workers who have been hit with one wage cut after another for decades.

The current industrial action, after such an extended period of dormancy, is being used to promote illusions that the HWU has turned over a new leaf since its previous secretary, Diana Asmar was sacked last year, accused of appropriating nearly \$3 million of union funds.

But behind the pantomime militancy, last week's rally showed that, under the HWU's "new" leadership, health workers can only expect more of the same: Sell-out union-government deals brokered behind closed doors and utter

contempt for the democratic rights of the membership, as displayed in the attack on the SEP.

Another example of that contempt is the fact that, even as its officials lead workers in chants denouncing Allan and Thomas, the HWU remains a paid-up affiliate of the Labor Party, to the tune of more than \$90,000 a year. Like all of the unions, the HWU bureaucracy serves as an integral part of the Labor Party and its governments, enforcing every attack on workers' conditions.

To fight back, health workers need to take matters into their own hands. Rank-and-file committees must be built in hospitals and other health facilities across the state as a means for workers themselves, not bureaucrats, to lead a fight for real wage increases, improved conditions and an end to job cuts and privatisation by stealth.

What is required is a united struggle involving staff from every section of the health system, including doctors and nurses, who all face a common attack but are presently kept isolated from one another by the trade unions. This is inseparable from a fight for a public health system of the highest quality, freely accessible to all.

The attack on health workers is part of a nationwide assault on the public sector and the working class as a whole. Overseen by the federal Labor government, state governments are systematically starving essential services of funds, while channelling billions into the coffers of big business, the corporate elite and the military.

Through rank-and-file committees, health workers can link their struggles across industry lines with broader sections of workers, who are also reeling from the brunt of Labor's austerity agenda amid a historic cost-of-living crisis.

Above all, the construction of rank-and-file committees must be directed towards a political struggle against the capitalist profit system, which is defended by Labor and their loyal partners in the union bureaucracies. That means adopting a socialist perspective to expropriate the wealth of the corporations and place it under the control of the working class to address social need.

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