

Australia: Health Workers Rank-and-File Committee opposes Labor's attack on disability services

Our reporter

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Last Wednesday, the Australian Health Workers Rank-and-File Committee (HWRFC) unanimously passed a resolution opposing the federal Labor government's cuts to the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) and discussed a campaign to mobilise health workers against this brutal austerity agenda.

Attended by disability support workers as well as doctors, nurses, pathology and other hospital services employees, the meeting opened with a report from HWRFC convenor Julia Thomas.

Labor's assault on the NDIS, she explained, was part of broader cuts to social spending, including attacks on health workers' jobs, wages and conditions, to pay for militarism and imperialist war abroad. She presented the following resolution:

- This meeting of the Health Workers Rank-and-File Committee (Australia) denounces the Albanese Labor government's \$35 billion cuts to the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) as a major attack on the working class and most vulnerable sections of the population, that will destroy lives.

- These are the largest cuts to any government program in Australian history. Annual funding growth will be slashed from 10 percent to 2 percent, well below inflation. At least 300,000 people will be driven off the scheme by 2030. Diagnosis-based eligibility, grounded in medical science, will be replaced by "functional assessments" designed to deny support. Social and community participation programs are being immediately cut by 16 percent. Tens of thousands of autistic children have already been removed, with no replacement supports in place.

- This attack is being carried out by the same government that has raised military spending to a record \$60 billion per year and pledged a further \$53 billion over the next decade for war preparations, alongside US imperialism. As the government demands unlimited money for war, there is nothing, Labor says, for the disabled and other vital social programs.

- This committee opposes these cuts. We do so, however, without defending the NDIS as a model for disability care. The NDIS was designed from the outset as a market-based voucher scheme, funnelling public funds into private, profit-driven providers. It was built on a Productivity Commission agenda of

reducing disability pensions and driving disabled people into low-wage work wherever possible. Labor is now stripping the funding, while leaving the privatised structure intact.

- We call for the immediate reversal of all announced cuts; the scrapping of the "functional assessment" regime; the reinstatement of all participants removed from the scheme; and the redirection of military spending to social need. We demand that no restrictions be imposed on the existing supports, services and care currently relied upon by NDIS participants.

- We demand no job losses or cuts to workers' wages and conditions, an end to insecure employment and the provision of permanent jobs for all disability workers who want them.

- We fight for a fundamentally different approach: disability care based on science and human need, not private profit. This means placing disability and health services under public ownership and democratic workers' control, and the grounding all eligibility and support decisions in the professional judgment of qualified medical and health practitioners. Every person with a disability has the right to comprehensive support—not whatever a government budget or a private provider determines is profitable.

- No struggle to defend disability services can succeed under the leadership of the union bureaucracies, which have subordinated workers to the Labor Party through decades of austerity. We call on disability support workers, health workers, NDIS participants and their families to build independent rank-and-file committees—democratically controlled by workers themselves—as the basis for a genuine fight. That fight must be linked to the broader international struggle of the working class against the capitalist system, which places profit above human life and need.

The resolution was passed unanimously.

Attendees spoke about the devastating ramifications of Labor's assault on the NDIS for patients and their families and the impact it will have on disability and health workers.

A mental health nurse from Melbourne spoke about Labor's plan to restrict access to the NDIS through "functional capacity" assessments, in place of medical diagnoses:

"Functional capacity varies from day to day. It's not set in

stone. And when they talk about evidence-based assessments—what exactly is the evidence they’re asking for and how are people with disabilities going to be able to afford [that]?

“Medical specialists charge about \$460 an hour but how are NDIS recipients supposed to afford reports to get evidence that they’ve got significantly diminished functional capacity? And what does ‘significantly diminished functional capacity’ actually mean? Capacity can wax and wane; you can be fine one day and then not fine the next,” he said.

“When the NDIS was started, there were alternative supports in the community, but since then they’ve been pretty much shut down. So, if they close the NDIS, there’s nothing to really go back to. A lot of people are at risk of having no supports at all. This is basically a social disaster because these people don’t have any money and they can’t really fight back. If you just suddenly shut down a program and there’s no support to go to, people can die.”

A pathology worker from Victoria and a Queensland public hospital doctor also spoke in the discussion, drawing connections between Labor’s attacks on NDIS and other cost-cutting assaults on health.

The pathology worker said: “I’ve worked in the public and private sectors but there’s been a lot of cost shifting. The cost of so many different tests, including for pregnancy, are now not covered by Medicare but offloaded straight onto the patient.”

The Queensland public hospital doctor commented: “One of the issues for many of our patients is getting them adequate support. It’s often the case that people are coming into hospital because of their illness, but being discharged with a new disability because they haven’t had adequate care.

“If one in five or one in six people are being removed from the NDIS under Labor’s plan, then there will be people in understaffed hospitals for much longer periods. And this will worsen the already existing overload and burnout being experienced by health workers.”

A disability support worker from New South Wales, who is involved in providing independent residential care for adults with various disabilities, also spoke, initially describing experiences with her own children.

“I’ve got three young adults who grew up with NDIS support. This included counselling and a lot of very important intervention work at school. I can’t imagine how we would have got them through school without that. They wouldn’t get that care and support now if they were coming into the system at this point. It would be really grim,” she said.

Referring to her own work she continued: “One of the things that’s likely to happen with the NDIS cuts is that we will lose some of our [independent living] houses and we will lose stay-awake shifts. They’re making it harder and harder to qualify for funding to have stay-awake staff.

“I’ve got one client who has MS [multiple sclerosis] and needs to be awoken three times a night. She’s a choking risk

and so it’s very important that she has night staff. But even at that level of need, she’s not eligible for the stay-awake shift. We have managed to keep her in a house with a stay-awake shift, but she’s not actually funded for it.

“Residents on NDIS have got used to being able to do things they were never able to do. They can have a support worker to take them to basketball training or to dancing or other things that they’ve never had the opportunity to do, and which is so vital for disabled people. We’re imaging that with the government focussing on community participation as a sort of ‘rot’ that all this will be wound back and people will lose it.

“The other thing that’s likely to happen is that our funding ratios will probably drop, which will mean we’ll end up having less staff on shift for the same number of clients. And that’s just a start. I need to talk a lot more to people about what they’re experiencing in their work,” she said.

Thomas urged all those in attendance to distribute the resolution. She pointed out that the Health Services Union had “explicitly endorsed these cuts,” noting that all the health union bureaucracies had isolated recent struggles by nurses, doctors, psychiatrists and other health workers fighting against low pay, understaffing and unsafe conditions in public health services.

The struggle against Labor’s regressive measures, she said, can only be taken forward through a unified independent mobilisation of all health workers based on a socialist program.

The Health Workers Rank-and-File Committee urges NDIS employees and other health workers, as well NDIS recipients and their families, to send comments on the impact of the government cuts and initiate a discussion on how to establish a rank-and-file committee.

Contact the HWRFC:

Email: sephw.aus@gmail.com

Twitter: [@HealthRandF_Aus](https://twitter.com/HealthRandF_Aus)

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