Australian union calls off strike by Victorian doctors

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A strike by Victorian public sector doctors planned for today was called off at the eleventh hour after the state Labor government reportedly raised an issue with the paperwork submitted by the union authorising the stoppage.

In what would have been their first strike in 20 years, thousands of doctors at seven Melbourne hospitals had planned to stop work for 3.5 hours, as part of a year-long enterprise bargaining dispute with the state Labor government over wages and conditions.

However, the Australian Salaried Medical Officers' Federation (ASMOF) told doctors in a statement yesterday, "Members should not stop work this Thursday," and that the strike would be postponed to next week.

ASMOF said it had called off the stoppage after the Labor government had "deployed its considerable taxpayer-funded legal resources to challenge the action on a technicality."

A government spokesperson told the *Herald Sun* it was "aware that the ASMOF has postponed its industrial action over concerns that it may not be protected under the Fair Work Act."

According to the *Herald Sun*, the legal issue in question is "whether the notice sent by the union two weeks ago met the criteria for a 'formal' notice—which is required for strike action to be legally protected—or was only an 'advance' notice."

ASMOF maintains "that the notice contained the information required to meet our statutory obligations and give health services ample time to prepare," noting that it was issued more than two weeks before the strike, far in excess of the five days required.

Despite this, and without the Labor government even having to ask the Fair Work Commission (FWC) to rule the industrial action "unprotected," ASMOF preemptively called off the strike. For all its bluster over an "extraordinary and intimidatory" intervention, the union immediately gave the government exactly what it wanted, entirely behind the backs of doctors.

While the exact nature of Labor's legal threat remains somewhat murky, two things are absolutely clear: 1) The Labor government is intensely hostile to the democratic rights of doctors and their demand for decent pay and conditions; and 2) ASMOF will use any pretext it can to curtail the struggle of the doctors it claims to represent.

The shutdown of the strike is a major betrayal by the union bureaucracy, after 97 percent of ASMOF-covered doctors who participated in a recent protected action ballot voted to strike. But it does not come entirely out of the blue.

Last year, in New South Wales (NSW), ASMOF encouraged public sector psychiatrists to resign en masse, claiming that such a stunt, rather than strike action, was the way they could advance their demands for decent pay and increased staffing. By promoting this act of individual defiance, the union not only isolated the specialists from other sections of the working class, but from each other.

Months later, when more than 5,000 NSW doctors did strike for three days, defying an Industrial Relations Commission order, ASMOF quickly shut the action down, insisting doctors could achieve their demands through arbitration before the same anti-worker tribunal that had just tried to ban their strike.

Victorian doctors should take these experiences of their NSW counterparts as a warning.

Even before the cancellation, the ASMOF bureaucracy had designed Thursday's stoppage as a limited affair, with its short duration and restriction to only a few of the state's hospitals. It was deliberately timed to keep doctors isolated from allied health workers, who walked off the job across the state and rallied in Melbourne on Tuesday.

The union's pay demand of a nominal increase of 30 percent over four years, even at face value, falls short of what is needed to keep up with the soaring cost of living and recoup real wage cuts imposed in previous ASMOF-Labor deals.

The union bureaucracy's demands for enforceable overtime payment, doctor-to-patient ratios, caps on shift lengths and consecutive night shifts, as well as improved parental leave, would do nothing to resolve the longstanding staffing crisis in the public hospital system, without any

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commitment from the government to a mass hiring program.

Decades of underfunding and understaffing under successive governments—Labor for 22 of the past 26 years—have left doctors working shifts of 12 to 16 hours, often without adequate breaks. A 2023 Victorian Department of Health report found one in four hospital workers experienced high to severe stress, while a 2024 ASMOF Victoria survey found 87 percent of junior doctors had worked unpaid overtime in the past 12 months and 93 percent had experienced burnout, with 94 percent fearing they could make a clinical error as a result.

The Australian Medical Association's "Public Hospitals Report Card 2026" found that "Evidence across Victoria shows unsafe fatigue and high stress levels remain common among hospital doctors, particularly doctors in training."

Such conditions, common throughout the country, are a major safety risk. Doctors are routinely expected to perform complex, high-stakes procedures—surgery, emergency resuscitation, critical care decisions—after massive shifts or multiple consecutive night shifts.

It is not only patients, but doctors who are at risk. In Tasmania in June, cardiothoracic registrar Dr Artyom Avetisyan was killed in a car crash after a roughly 20-hour shift at Launceston General Hospital, as he drove back to Hobart to work at the Royal Hobart Hospital. Clinicians are frequently required to travel between hospitals and work extended hours, turning routine commutes into a serious fatigue-related safety risk.

Far from addressing these dire issues, the Victorian Labor government is implementing further cuts. The state's $32.3 billion 2026–27 health budget, even according to the government's own figures, does not keep pace with inflation, population growth and an ageing population.

This is in line with the slashing of public sector wages and social spending being carried out by state and federal Labor governments around the country. This is starkly expressed in the federal government's $38 billion cut to the National Disability Insurance Scheme, which will strip all support from more than 300,000 people with disabilities, and deny all but the most basic care to hundreds of thousands more.

The Victorian government's attack on the doctors' strike is part of a broader confrontation with public sector employees. Teachers have twice voted down agreements to cut their pay and conditions, worked out by the Australian Education Union and Labor.

The doctors' strike was to follow Tuesday's second statewide strike by Victorian allied health workers—including physiotherapists, radiographers, psychologists and pharmacists—who are seeking a 36 percent pay rise over three years.

Along with doctors, Victorian educators, allied health workers, as well as broader layers of the public sector, confront a common enemy. They are up against a Labor government that is deeply hostile to their interests and intransigent in its determination to impose deeper cuts to real wages and conditions.

What is therefore posed is not just an industrial struggle, but a political one, which cannot be fought within the framework of the unions, which are tied by a thousand threads to Labor, and which have revealed in these disputes that their aim is to shut down workers' struggles and impose the demands of the government.

What is required is the building of rank-and-file committees in hospitals and workplaces, controlled by doctors themselves and independent of the union apparatus, that can democratically formulate demands—on pay, staffing, hours and safe conditions—based on what is genuinely required rather than what Labor and the profit interests it represents deems "affordable."

These committees should actively link up with nurses, midwives and other health workers already engaged in disputes across Victoria and elsewhere, to coordinate action and break down the isolation that unions enforce between different sections of the health workforce.

This struggle cannot be separated from the broader fight for a socialist reorganisation of society, in which high-quality healthcare is provided as a universal social right, freely accessible to all and with fair pay and conditions for all staff.

Contact the Health Workers' Rank-and-File Committee (HWRFC):
Email: sephw.aus@gmail.com
Twitter: @HealthRandF_Aus
Facebook: facebook.com/groups/hwrfcaus

The Socialist Equality Party will hold an online public meeting on August 16 at 2 p.m. (AEST) to discuss a socialist perspective to fight the Albanese Labor government's sweeping attack on the NDIS. We urge NDIS participants, family members, health workers and educators and other sections of the working class and youth to attend this vital meeting. Click here to register.

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