

Australia: Allied health workers strike against Victorian Labor's deepening cuts

Our reporters
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Around 1,500 allied health workers rallied outside the Peter MacCallum Cancer Centre in Melbourne on August 11, as part of a statewide strike over wages and increasingly dire conditions in the public health system.

It was the second 24-hour strike by the radiographers, physiotherapists, podiatrists, pharmacists, speech pathologists, occupational therapists and other health professionals, in a 10-month enterprise bargaining dispute with the state Labor government.

Labor has offered workers a meagre 19–21 percent nominal pay rise over four years, barely higher than the current official inflation rate of 3.8 percent and far short of what is necessary to keep up with the real rise in living costs for workers. This will further entrench the losses incurred under the last union-Labor enterprise agreement, which slashed real wages for public sector allied health workers by 10 percent.

Moreover, Labor's offer would do nothing to address workers' concerns over excessive workload, burnout and unsafe staff-to-patient ratios, or the staffing shortages that underly them.

The rally showed the anger and determination of workers, who travelled not only from all the major Melbourne hospitals, but from across the state, many with their own handmade placards and banners.

But anger and determination alone are not enough. Left in the hands of the Victorian Allied Health Professionals Association (VAHPA) bureaucracy, this struggle will end in betrayal.

Union speakers at the rally did not at any point raise a concrete wage demand. This is a warning sign that the VAHPA leadership is preparing a sellout deal with Labor for far less than the 36.18 percent over three years previously advanced by the union and endorsed by workers.

The rally was designed to promote illusions that workers could achieve their demands through plaintive appeals to the very same Labor government that is trying to slash their wages.

The speakers, who did not mention the word "Labor,"

were not only covering for the government's current attacks, but the responsibility of the party—which has been in government for 22 of the past 26 years—for the degradation of the public health system, for patients and staff alike.

VAHPA first turned the platform over to Greens MP Dr Sarah Mansfield, who referred to the real wage cut allied health workers have endured over the past four years but did not mention that it was Labor and the union bureaucracy that imposed it. The reality is that the Greens are not an alternative to Labor, but its close collaborator, whose phony oppositional posturing is aimed at winning electoral support and channelling workers and youth back behind the official parliamentary set-up.

VAHPA executive officer Andrew Hewat told workers the strike was "to send a message to the state government that we've had enough," and that "we want the government to be looking at the bigger picture."

Hewat's banal platitudes, highlighted by his statement that "hopefully we will get a deal," were intended to send a message to the striking workers, that rather than escalating their struggle, all they need do is hope that the Labor government sees the error of its ways.

This is a fraud. The Victorian Labor government is not only attacking the wages and conditions of allied health workers, but the entire public sector. This is part of a broader assault on the working class by state and federal Labor governments, exemplified by the sweeping cuts to the National Disability Insurance Scheme, which will deny essential care to hundreds of thousands of people with disabilities.

Allied health workers cannot rely on "hope" in the VAHPA bureaucracy, any more than in the Labor government. New organisations of struggle must be built, democratically run by workers themselves and independent of the unions and Labor.

Through these rank-and-file committees, allied health workers can link up with other sections of workers, across health, education and the broader public sector, who all confront similar attacks and a common enemy. This includes

public sector doctors, who yesterday carried out their first strike in two decades, against the Labor government's real wage cuts.

This is diametrically opposed to the role played by VAHPA and all of the unions, which is to divide workers up, industry by industry and workplace by workplace, wearing workers down through increasingly limited and demoralising actions and creating the conditions for sellout union-government deals to be pushed through.

A unified struggle of public sector workers, coordinated through rank-and-file committees, would provide a powerful basis for the political fight that is required. The struggle for decent pay and conditions in health, education and other vital public industries is incompatible with capitalism, under which all human need is subordinated to the profit demands of big business. What is required is the fight for a new political perspective, socialism, in which the vast resources controlled by the wealthy elite can be used to fulfil the needs of society, including for high-quality, well-resourced public hospitals, with decent wages for all staff.

World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke to striking workers at the August 11 rally.

Ben has been a physiotherapist for six years now working in the orthopaedic stream at Monash Health, the largest health network in Victoria. Ben said about the strike, "This is the second one that I've participated in for the full day. Historically being quite a small union in comparison to the nurses and the teachers, it's good to see so many people turn out to try and make our voice heard. The story that we've been battling since we started bargaining is the budget doesn't allow much money for wriggle room for our funding anyway.

"We feel like we've been left behind for so long, especially with our union not having advocated for pay raises historically. The thing with this bargaining is to close the current gap that we have between different states in Australia."

Jac, a speech pathologist from Royal Melbourne, said the government's response to their demands was "extremely disappointing. We have a massive issue with attrition in our industry, and lots of people are moving to private work which is much more appealing. Much more money. The equivalent new grad who enters the private workforce will get like \$100,000, while we start around \$60,000. This has a direct impact on our patients because it means it's less competitive for our workforce."

Jac explained that health workers faced significant pressure not to strike from management, the government and the corporate media: "We're all caring and we don't want to be on strike, we want to be with our patients today. They'll

manipulate that and say that we're abandoning our patients. But really, this is for [patients].

"I think there's just a general kind of unrest and with the imminent election, I think this is a really important time to get behind these kinds of causes, with the momentum from the teachers, and now the doctors."

Jana and **Kath** are both speech pathologists from Western Health. Kath, with 16 years' experience, said, "I'm advocating for us to be respected, considered, and to have appropriate workloads as well. We're all just wanting the best that we can get for the cost of living so that we can do our jobs and support patients in our care.

Jana said, "I think in the caring professions, it's the burnout as well, the unfair, unsafe workloads. I'm 27 years old, I've only been working for two and a half years, and I'm already feeling the burnout. If you think about how long of a career I have left in front of me...

"We need to be paid better for what we do, and the system needs to be rejigged so that we are not facing those unsafe workloads. We work under conditions where there's a very high demand and there's not enough of us to meet that demand."

Kyaa, a physiotherapist and VAHPA delegate at St Vincents Hospital, said, "We're fighting for fair wages, pay and conditions. Our wages are the lowest in the country. All we want is to be treated fairly and have good ratios that allow us to provide excellent care to patients, because at the moment the Victorian government isn't supporting us to do that.

"This is our second 24-hour strike. We've also had four three-hour strikes, and we've had massive turnouts to all of them. There's a lot of support from workers on the ground to try and get better outcomes for us. We've had one offer since October last year, that was so far below what we're asking for. It didn't address any of our concerns about conditions either.

"In our last EBA, we lost 10 percent based on inflation, so we're just looking to recoup that and to be on par with what nurses are getting paid and what allied health in other states are getting paid, so that we don't lose our workforce to private or to interstate."



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