A socialist solution to the Victorian healthcare crisis

Morgan Peach, SEP candidate for Northern Metropolitan
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The public health and hospital system in Victoria is in crisis. As the campaign for the Victorian state election gets underway, the various capitalist parties—Labor, the Liberal-National Coalition, One Nation and the Greens—barely refer to the chronic conditions of healthcare for working people. All of these parties are committed to slashing government spending on essential services, including for health, not ending the disaster.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) is standing myself, Morgan Peach, and Peter Byrne in the Northern Metropolitan region in the upper house to advance a socialist program as the means for the working class to fight for its class interests, including the millions of Victorians who depend on public hospitals.

Across Victoria, emergency departments are overwhelmed. More than 13,000 patients spent over 24 hours in an emergency department in the past year, Australasian College of Emergency Medicine Victorian branch chair Dr Mark Putland told the *Age* in September. Paramedics report ambulances waiting outside hospitals for hours before patients can be transferred. Elderly people, including those in their nineties, are sometimes left waiting nearly an entire day for a ward bed.

A damning indictment is the state of the new Footscray Hospital, the centrepiece of the Labor government's health infrastructure program. Opened early in the year at a cost of $1.5 billion, the hospital can accommodate more than 500 beds—yet roughly 170 remain closed because the government refuses to provide the operational funding to staff them. Patients needing urgent surgery are waiting up to 72 hours in the emergency department and are being forced to go to other hospitals for treatment.

The same pattern is repeated at the Royal Children's Hospital. A leaked memo from the hospital's director of emergency medicine, Dr Stuart Lewena, revealed that 20 beds in a multimillion-dollar redevelopment would remain empty—even as record numbers of sick children flood the hospital. Only after the memo was published in the lead-up to the election did Health Minister Ingrid Stitt promise extra funding for 85 full-time equivalent nursing positions.

In regional Victoria, chronic shortages of GPs, hospital staff and aged-care facilities have left communities struggling. When a Terang GP took maternity leave late last year and a replacement could not be found, patients faced three-to-four-month waits for routine appointments including prescription renewals and blood-pressure checks.

Unable to obtain timely care, patients are arriving at emergency departments increasingly ill. Meanwhile, elderly patients remain hospitalised because of the lack of nursing home beds and home support.

Problems facing patients are compounded by inadequate Medicare rebates and pressure on GP clinics to shorten consultations. Australian patients with multiple chronic illnesses are roughly half as likely as the OECD average to attend practices routinely offering appointments longer than 15 minutes, increasing the chances of health problems not being assessed properly.

Nowhere is the catastrophe more severe than in mental health. More than five years after the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System recommended urgent improvements, conditions have only deteriorated. Nineteen of Victoria's 21 adult mental health services are failing to meet the target of admitting 80 percent of acutely unwell patients to a bed within eight hours—a target the state has gone backwards on since 2021. In Melbourne's working-class southeast, Dandenong hospital admits an average of just 8.49 percent of mental health patients within eight hours. Mental health patients represent the vast majority of the people stuck in emergency departments for more than 24 hours.

A dispute has also emerged over the number of new mental health beds: while the Labor government claimed

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in August that 230 had opened, sector representatives could account for only 174, and the minister refused to say where the missing 56 beds were placed.

The election promises of the establishment parties are a fraud. Labor has announced a $1.5 billion plan to expand 12 emergency departments, hire 1,500 workers and open 250 beds to reduce waiting time by just 20 percent. It is a drop in the ocean.

Labor is also responsible for the slashing of health funding at the federal level and in other states, where conditions are just as bad. The federal Labor government is ramming through the largest attack on a social program in history—a massive cut of $38 billion to the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) over four years that will inevitably force significant numbers of the disabled onto chronically under-resourced services in every state.

The Coalition has pledged $1.27 billion to halve the elective surgery waitlist by diverting thousands of public patients to private hospitals—a direct subsidy to the private health industry. The Coalition has also proposed a decade-long hiring freeze on back-office public-service roles, although it claims frontline healthcare workers would be exempt.

The Greens posture as a progressive alternative, promising a raft of reforms including free dental care and more money for prevention, community and mental health, funded by "taxing the big gambling corporations." These promises will inevitably be sacrificed in the parliamentary wheeling and dealing that has been the party's stock-in-trade in every state and at the federal level.

Health workers have been driven into struggle—doctors, nurses, allied health professionals and paramedics—but have been betrayed at every turn by the trade union bureaucracies.

Hundreds of doctors walked off the job for four hours at the Ballarat and Bendigo emergency departments on September 3. Last month doctors struck at major hospitals across the state. Yet with the state election looming, their union—the Australian Salaried Medical Officers Federation (ASMOF)—called off a second statewide strike and rammed through a sell-out deal with the Labor government virtually identical to the one overwhelmingly rejected previously.

Whichever parties form the next government will deepen the assault on public health with the assistance of the trade unions. We call on health workers to take matters into their own hands and form their own rank-and-file committees independent of the unions as the means of fighting for their interests. These rank-and-file committees need to reach out to health workers in other states who face similar attacks and more broadly to the working class nationally and internationally that suffers the impact of deteriorating public health and hospital care.

The SEP proposes the following demands, based not on government budget requirements, but on what health workers and their patients actually need: Free, universal, high-quality healthcare funded by the expropriation of the banks and major corporations; massive recruitment of doctors, nurses and all health workers in secure jobs with inflation-busting wage rises; enforceable limits on hours and workloads; and full funding for mental health.

These demands cannot be met within the framework of capitalism. The fight for a decent health system is inseparable from the struggle to overthrow the profit system itself and refashion society from top to bottom based on the social needs of the vast majority, not the profits of the wealthy few. We urge all health workers to contact the Health Workers Rank-and-File Committee. We also appeal to all workers and young people to support and participate in our election campaign, vote for Morgan Peach and Peter Byrne in Northern Metropolitan, and join our party in the fight for socialism.

Contact the Health Workers' Rank-and-File Committee (HWRFC):

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