Australia: Hundreds protest in Newcastle against Catholic takeover of hospitals

Our reporters
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Around 500 workers and young people rallied at Civic Park in Newcastle, New South Wales (NSW) on November 8, to protest the proposed sale of Newcastle Private and Hunter Valley Private hospitals to Calvary Health Care, which will result in the closure of a number of critical medical services, including abortion.

Calvary has applied to acquire some 14 hospitals across the country, following the collapse of HealthScope, Australia's second-largest private hospital operator, which went into receivership in May 2025.

Calvary, which was founded by the Catholic Church, has confirmed that, under its "ethical code," these hospitals will no longer provide elective abortions, contraceptive procedures such as vasectomies and tubal ligation, in-vitro fertilisation (IVF) and other assisted reproductive technologies, as well as voluntary assisted dying and gender affirming surgeries.

Opposition and outrage is widespread over the gutting of these vital services. Doctors have warned that the changes could affect more than 1,000 IVF patients a year. A petition to stop the transfer and demanding no loss of existing services, has garnered over 7,000 signatures.

The handover of a vast chunk of Australia's health infrastructure to an organisation that operates on the basis of backward and anti-scientific religious doctrine is a major attack on the working class, directed most sharply against women.

The restriction of access to abortion is a step in the same direction as the 2022 overturn of *Roe v. Wade* in the US—"an illegitimate, anti-democratic and unconstitutional assault on the democratic rights of the entire population," as the Socialist Equality Party wrote at the time.

The banning of procedures in certain privately run hospitals is not identical to the criminalisation of medical treatment. But the impact is significant—the evisceration of the public health system over decades by governments, Labor and Liberal-National, federal and state, means many workers are dependent on private health care, despite the enormous cost.

The subordination of the health needs of the working class to the dogma of the Catholic Church is the logical extension of this bipartisan privatisation drive, which has given corporations control over what medical treatment is provided and who receives it, on the basis of what delivers the most profits. Hospitals are treated not as social infrastructure, but as assets to be bought and sold for profit.

The NSW Labor government is fully backing the sale, with Health Minister Ryan Park threatening that if Calvary does not take over the hospitals, more healthcare services will be cut, including "cardiac, anaesthesia, general surgery." In other words, workers have a choice: hospitals in which democratic rights are driven decades back in time, or no hospitals at all.

The Newcastle rally, organised by the Hunter Workers Women's Committee—an arm of the trade union bureaucracy—was designed to contain and divert the anger of the hundreds of health workers, students and other sections of workers protesting. It was an exercise in covering for Labor and promoting illusions that the handover of hospitals in the region can be prevented through appeals to the very government that is overseeing and promoting it.

Underscoring this, local Labor MPs were brought on to the platform. Making clear that their government is working to ensure the transfer goes through, they suggested that the Catholic Church's reactionary opposition to abortion and other vital medical treatments could be overcome through negotiation.

Labor Member for Newcastle Sharon Claydon said: "At the very least, we should be hitting a big pause button on any proposal, while genuine concerns… remain unanswered."

Member for Charlestown and Minister for Women Jodie Harrison was booed by sections of the crowd when she said that she was, "seeking to meet with Calvary, to impress on them the importance of these services."

Seeking to downplay the significance of the handover, she added: "I've spoken many times with Minister Park over the last week… and been assured me that [these services] will

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continue to be accessible, either through other providers or the public system."

A representative from the New South Wales Nurses and Midwives' Association (NSWNMA), repeated this line, saying that, "Private hospitals do have a role, they do have a role in complementing the public system… if the government allows faith-based organisations the choice to remove these essential services, it must ensure that they are prioritised elsewhere and are available to the community."

What a fraud! The NSWNMA bureaucracy is well aware of the dire state of public health, not least because they have played a critical role, in partnership with Labor and the Coalition, in imposing it through repeated sell-outs of health workers' struggles for decent wages and conditions. The "role" of private hospitals is to cover over the gaping holes in the public system, at least for those who can afford to pay.

Socialist Equality Party members spoke with workers and youth at the rally, raising the fundamental political questions posed by the Calvary takeover. It is the latest demonstration of the incompatibility of the capitalist profit system with the needs of the working class, including for free access to high-quality health care, including abortion.

This is poses the necessity of a fight to establish a workers' government to implement a socialist program—hospitals and other vital public infrastructure, as well as the major corporations and banks, must be placed under democratic workers' control and ownership so that society's vast resources can be used to satisfy human need, not further the profits of the wealthy few.

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A doctor told the *World Socialist Web Site*: "Considering Newcastle Private is the only hospital in the Hunter that provides fertility services, [Calvary] buying it over will be very detrimental to healthcare, especially for women.

"You've also got an oncology unit there, but then not allowing voluntary assisted dying to be offered at the hospital is terrible."

Regarding the privatisation of healthcare, he said, "It's cheaper for the government to have private companies pick up the tab, as opposed to putting the funding in themselves for more staff, more services for public hospitals… They've opened up new parts of the John Hunter [public hospital] building, but they haven't funded new staff and now Newcastle Private has agreed to offload their IVF program to the John Hunter, without providing any additional funding for that, when the John Hunter is already so short-staffed to begin with.

"[The Labor government] would rather spend money on wars, on submarines—we don't need this, we need healthcare. And there's no point consulting with the MPs and the government—look at the nurses' pay and the doctors' pay negotiations. They consulted us and then ignored whatever we said anyway. We need people in power who actually want to make the change.

"All the protests that we've done, doctors and nurses—we would walk off the job for an hour or two—but that's not been effective. It would be better if we walk off the job and don't come back until conditions are met. The government needs nursing staff, doctors, admin staff, and they wouldn't be able to replace us fast enough. If patients suffer, this is not our fault, it's the government's fault.

Asked the response of the unions and whether they were doing anything to oppose the takeover, he replied, "They're useless. They just bend over and do whatever the government wants. We pay them our fees, but they do nothing for us."

Anjah, a pharmacy student, said, "I speak to people every day who struggle to access healthcare services even though they are available. There's a lot of strain on the public healthcare system and a lot of regional communities that access these hospitals.

"This will lead to worse outcomes for our communities. It's targeting those most vulnerable, especially the low socioeconomic and indigenous people and those who don't have access to Medicare. You shouldn't have to choose between affording basic healthcare and your groceries, but many people do."

Josie, a paramedic student, said, "We're both regional students, we see in our communities how hard the healthcare workforce works to keep up with demand, so I wanted to come out and show my support. This will impact every demographic—the elderly, the young, the middle-aged.

"I'm an IVF baby myself, so I know how important these services are and when they go it will become harder and more expensive. Healthcare is a human right—the privatisation of healthcare really shouldn't be a thing, when people are making profits from those accessing basic care."

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