Australia: Labor’s track record exposes its meagre promises on health

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25 November 2026

The November 28 Victorian state election is taking place amid a crisis of the public health system that none of the major parties is prepared to confront. Labor, the Liberal-National Coalition, One Nation and the Greens are all parties of big business, committed to the subordination of healthcare to profit.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) is standing Morgan Peach and Peter Byrne in Northern Metropolitan to advance the only perspective that can resolve the crisis: the independent political mobilisation of the working class, including health workers, against all the parliamentary parties and the capitalist system they serve.

Facing the prospect of a massive electoral defeat, Premier Ben Carroll declared at Labor’s official campaign launch, “We’ll slash ED [emergency department] waits by 20 percent, slash surgery waitlists by 50 percent, and slash dental care costs by 100 percent.”

Carroll’s statement points to the dire level to which the public health system has degenerated, primarily under Labor, which has governed Victoria for 12 consecutive years, and for all but four years since 1999.

Even taken at face value, Labor’s election promises would not begin to reverse the bipartisan evisceration of public health in Victoria. It has pledged $1.17 billion for 100,000 additional elective surgeries in public hospitals—25,000 a year—and $1.5 billion over four years to expand 12 emergency departments.

These pledges are a drop in the ocean. There are currently more than 70,000 patients waiting for elective surgery, and the tally is growing every day. Victorian public hospitals performed a record 217,952 planned surgeries in 2025–26, yet the waiting list rose from a year earlier.

Almost one third of people presenting to Victorian emergency departments are not treated within the recommended time, with over half spending more than four hours in the ED, and more than a third of ambulance transfers taking longer than 40 minutes. But Carroll is crowing about the prospect of reducing wait times by one fifth!

The premier’s claim to “slash dental care costs by 100 percent” is utter fantasy. Labor is promising to establish just 20 free public dental clinics across a state of over 7 million people.

The reality is that, if Labor is re-elected, even these meagre promises will not come to fruition, as the government’s track record shows.

Ahead of the 2018 election, Labor promised $675 million to build or expand 10 community hospitals by 2024–25. Eight years later, three proposed facilities—Torquay, Eltham and Emerald Hill—have been removed from the government’s active project listings. By November 2025, only five of the remaining seven facilities had begun accepting patients.

Even where facilities have opened, questions remain about the availability and operating hours of services originally promised. In the working-class suburb of Craigieburn, the new hospital is open only from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. on weekdays, and its urgent care clinic closes at 8 p.m.

In 2022, Labor pledged to start construction on a West Gippsland hospital in 2024 and begin rebuilding the Maroondah Hospital in 2025, but neither project has commenced and funding has not been allocated for Maroondah.

Among those hospitals that have been built or redeveloped since the turn of the century, the vast majority—including Royal Children’s, Frankston, Bendigo, Casey and Footscray—are so-called Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs).

Under these arrangements, the private sector finances, designs and constructs the hospital, and is responsible for building maintenance and facilities management, while

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the public sector pays for all these private services and retains ownership and responsibility for clinical and administrative staffing. They function as a mechanism for funnelling public money for healthcare into the private sector.

At the new Footscray Hospital, delivered through a PPP, doctors said in October that 170 of its 504 beds remained unopened because the government had not funded the staff to operate them. At the Royal Children's Hospital, a leaked warning that 20 new emergency beds would remain empty prompted the Labor government to commit $66 million for 85 additional nursing positions. The beds are due to open in December.

The prevalence of these arrangements exposes the fraud promoted by Labor and the unions that there is an ideological disagreement between the major parties over the privatisation of essential services, including health.

In the 1990s, the Victorian Liberal government of Jeff Kennett destroyed 17 hospitals and 10,000 health jobs. This was a major wrecking operation, but it did not come out of the blue. Preparations for hospital privatisation had already been underway under the state Labor governments of John Cain and Joan Kirner, and were part of a broader selloff of public infrastructure spearheaded above all by the Hawke-Keating federal Labor governments.

Moreover, the Labor governments that have led Victoria almost without interruption since the Kennett era, far from reversing the handover of public hospitals to big business, have further entrenched it, including through PPPs, which amount to privatisation by stealth.

The dire state of Victoria's public health system now is the result of four decades of this bipartisan policy of privatisation and sweeping cuts. It could not have been carried out without the complicity of the unions, which have enforced every brutal measure and suppressed the opposition of health workers to attacks on their wages and conditions, and the evisceration of public hospitals.

Working hand-in-glove with Labor governments in particular, the health unions have imposed successive real wage cuts amid a soaring cost-of-living crisis, driving workers out of the sector and worsening already chronic staff shortages and excessive workload.

This year, as with educators and other public sector workers in Victoria, who confront a similar assault, health workers have been trying to fight back. Doctors struck for the first time in decades. Allied health workers have walked off the job three times this year. But their struggles have been systematically isolated, undermined and betrayed by the trade union bureaucracies.

Whatever the election result on Saturday, the attack on health workers and the public health system will only deepen. Whichever of the big-business parties form government will impose the harsh austerity demanded by finance capital to place the burden of Victoria's massive debt on the shoulders of the working class.

The SEP advances a fundamentally opposed perspective. The crisis of the health system cannot be resolved by appeals to the parties that created it, or through the trade unions that suppress the struggle against it. Health workers must take the fight into their own hands by building rank-and-file committees, democratically controlled by workers and independent of the union bureaucracies and all capitalist parties. Through such committees, health workers can formulate demands based on what they and their patients actually need.

The SEP advocates: 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 to provide free high-quality dental care for all and mental health care for all those that need it.

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. Hospitals, health funds and pathology companies, along with all the major corporations and banks, must be placed under public ownership and democratic workers' control, and the vast wealth hoarded by a tiny minority used to meet social needs. We urge all health workers to contact the Health Workers Rank-and-File Committee and all workers and young people to vote for the SEP and join the fight for socialism.

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

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