

Union suppresses socialist perspective at Australian mental health workers' strike "rally"

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Public mental health nurses and workers in the state of Victoria struck on March 17 over a stalled enterprise bargaining agreement (EBA). The three-hour stopwork was called by the Health and Community Services Union (HACSU) to try to head off growing anger among the workers toward the state's Labor government.

Working with the union, Premier Daniel Andrews' government has stalled the "bargaining" process since 2019, forcing workers to continue working at 2016 wage levels. The government is apparently reneging on even the regressive EBA interim deal that the union pushed through last October in order to halt industrial action.

The HACSU has continued to restrict work stoppages, divide mental health workers and sow illusions in the Andrews government.

Thursday's strike highlighted both the discontent among workers and the nervousness of the unions, which are struggling to keep a lid on workers' anger.

The HACSU said it had called the strike too late to organise buses to bring workers together from regional Victoria, or even within Melbourne, the state capital.

Fewer than 30 mental health workers attended the "rally" in Melbourne, held at Trades Hall. They were almost outnumbered by union bureaucrats. The low turnout reflects both the union's inability and unwillingness to mobilise its membership for fear that a large attendance might stoke a fighting spirit among mental health nurses and in the working class more broadly. Undoubtedly, many workers saw the strike for what it was: another in a string of union stunts, aimed at dissipating workers' anger.

Socialist Equality Party (SEP) campaigners attended the event to speak with workers about their conditions and advance a socialist perspective to fight for their interests, independent of the anti-worker trade union. They

distributed the WSWs articles on "Australian mental health workers to take stopwork action" and the recent defiant stand of nurses in New South Wales (NSW).

A psychiatric nurse told the SEP team: "We're out here today because we haven't got our EBA conditions met. Our basic rights are not being met, as mental health workers, psychiatric nurses. We're all pretty appalled. The mental health crisis has been a crisis for many years, even before the pandemic. So, to say that we're 'frontline workers' and give us lip service over the years, but not provide us with a basic pay increase, basic rights that we're fighting for—that's why we're here today."

The nurse said "emergency departments were already overrun," but the COVID-19 pandemic meant "now they're even more overrun because of the number of people coming in sick. Now psychiatric patients are not getting proper service because they come to the ED [emergency department] and they are waiting several hours. Sometimes people are waiting 12 hours just to have a psychiatric assessment."

She said staff-to-patient ratios were becoming unbearable, with the pandemic intensifying a crisis that already existed. Staff shortages due to COVID infections meant that "you're constantly working under numbers."

Nurses were demanding "annual leave, pay, basic rights," but "the biggest thing is to have a reasonable pay increase for what we do. The work we do doesn't get properly recognised. Unlike politicians who have just gotten a 14 percent wage rise."

After the workers rejected a flat 2 percent annual pay offer in August, October's union-government deal split them in monetary terms. Pay rises for different categories of workers would range from 2 to 2.6 percent a year over four years, when inflation is already officially 3.5 percent and rising rapidly, driven by escalating fuel and food

prices.

Asked what she thought about uniting workers in a common struggle, the nurse replied: “Of course we should unite. It just shows the inequity in society, doesn’t it? It’s a Liberal [federal] government, but I actually don’t think it matters which government is in charge. It just seems that nurses and teachers are always the ones that get the verbal praise, but then there’s no conditions given.”

Soon after arriving, SEP campaigners were set upon by union officials, who declared they had no right to be speaking with workers because they were not HACSU members. By contrast, however, the officials had enthusiastically greeted someone handing out flyers for a rally called by a dozen pro-union and pseudo-left groups, including Socialist Alliance and Solidarity.

Those flyers called for “a fight back now to start to rebuild a fighting trade unionism in Australia,” supposedly for “public health and workplace safety.” They made no criticism of the HACSU or the other unions. The unions are working closely with the Labor government, and governments around the country, to dismantle safety measures and force workers into unsafe workplaces amid the pandemic, now fuelled by the highly-transmissible and deadly Omicron BA.2 mutation.

The warm relations between the union officials and the pseudo-left groups displayed at the event highlights the role of fake left groups in seeking to keep workers straitjacketed by the thoroughly pro-business unions.

The SEP team pointed out the obvious double standard that pseudo-left flyers were welcomed by the union, while WSWS articles were banned. They noted that workers had warmly received them, that the SEP had a democratic right to advance a socialist alternative, and that workers had a democratic right to hear that perspective.

Six union bureaucrats, including HACSU assistant state secretary Kate Marshall, soon surrounded the SEP campaigners. The officials demanded the SEP team leave, insisting that the “rally” was a “closed function” for “HACSU members only.”

A union official added that the pseudo-left campaigner had “done his due diligence and spoken to us before and we decided to allow him to be here.” In other words, only material vetted by the union can be shown to workers. The SEP supporters were then escorted out of the building.

The union’s response reflects weakness and fear. The officials are concerned that workers are angry and the perspective outlined by the SEP will win a hearing. After the SEP team was ejected, the HACSU passed a motion

proposing a 24-hour stoppage and work bans if the union-government EBA had not “progressed to a vote” by April 7.

Yesterday, the HACSU’s Facebook page announced that the agreement had “not only been drafted” but “approved by government lawyers over the weekend.” The union released no details, saying members would see the agreement document for a seven-day period before voting on it “and HACSU will provide further information.”

In other words, the union will only show the agreement to workers once it has been given the green light by the government and the employers. Such backroom deals and tight-lipped announcements of union “victories” are part and parcel of how unions keep workers in the dark while imposing retrograde agreements.

Mental health workers and nurses need to draw conclusions from these experiences. What is required is a break with these anti-worker organisations, which act as industrial police forces to divide workers and suppress working-class action.

New organisations of struggle must be built—rank-and-file committees, controlled by workers themselves—to unite nurses and health workers, paramedics, doctors and health workers internationally, who face similar intolerable conditions. These committees would discuss the need for socialist policies, including a decent wages and safe working conditions for all healthcare workers, and free, high-quality healthcare for all.



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