

## Australia Dossier by Allen Douglas and Robert Barwick

### Doctors strike against federal axe

*While the ill wait—and some die—to get treatment, the Howard government is claiming there are “too many doctors.”*

**O**n March 10, interns and residents in public hospitals in the state of New South Wales went out on strike indefinitely in protest against the federal government's savage cuts in health care, including its plans to cut back the number of new general practitioners licensed each year from 800 to 400, an astonishing 50% cut.

This strike by “junior doctors,” as they are known in Australia, leaves only a skeleton staff manning the hospitals; all elective surgeries are cancelled, no outpatient clinics are held, and emergency departments suffer deadly delays. As we go to press, negotiations were under way with Federal Health Minister Michael Wooldridge to end the strike; his arrogant refusal to meet with the physicians was one of the major causes of the strike.

The decision to strike, which has been supported by most of the senior doctors' associations, such as the Australian Medical Association, was not taken lightly. But, Dr. John Cunningham, a junior doctor himself, told the *New Citizen* newspaper, that the widespread triage against the health care system had left them little choice: “We're sick and tired of telling people they have to wait six months for their operation. They're turning people away from casualty [emergency rooms]. . . . The health system is grossly underfunded.”

Until recently, Australia has had a relatively well-functioning system of universal medical care. But the free-trade deregulation policies, begun under the 1983-96 Hawke-Keating Labor governments and continued under

the current Liberal-National coalition, have savaged the economy and led to a collapse of government revenues.

In the face of this self-inflicted crisis, in December of last year, the federal government decided to cut spending by 4% in every department except defense—and debt payment. The plan to slash licensing of 400 new practitioners a year was touted as necessary “to hold down Medicare costs.” This is absurd, since, as Dr. Cunningham put it, “Reducing the number of doctors . . . will not reduce the number of patients, hence the Medicare budget will not be affected. Rather, waiting time to see doctors will increase, as the same number of patients will be trying to see even fewer doctors.”

Particularly nasty was the government's plan to make the policy retroactive: 400 junior doctors who have already invested up to seven years in training, will now not be granted the right to be licensed as full-fledged doctors. Health Minister Wooldridge has said that those 400 whose careers have now been destroyed, should “drive taxis.”

For the several members of Prime Minister John Howard's cabinet who are members of think-tanks tied to the Mont Pelerin Society, the “budget crisis” is merely an excuse to do what they want to do anyway: loot the public sector through radical cuts in social services, and through “privatization,” which is expected as the next step for Australia's health-care system. As one striking doctor told *EIR* about the “managed care” that Australia's insurance companies are now peddling

(Wooldridge has already started two pilot projects), “We know roughly how the health system in America works, and it stinks!”

The Australian privateers say that the national health system should look like that of the state of Victoria. There, a Mont Pelerin think-tank, the Institute of Public Affairs, wrote a privatization plan called “Project Victoria,” which Mont Pelerin poster boy and Victorian Premier Jeff Kennett started implementing as soon as he came to power in 1992. Under the guise of “corporatizing” the health system, preparatory to privatizing it, Kennett has shut down some hospitals, and will close another six in the near future, eliminating a total of 1,800 beds since 1992. He has slashed personnel, including nurses and cleaning staff, as well. As a result, “Golden Staph” infection has become common in Victoria's hospitals. Waiting lists have soared—11,000 Victorians have now been waiting six months or more for surgery.

Two cases, which achieved public notice last year, are typical of the Nuremberg crime of “denying health care,” now common in Kennett's Victoria: Mrs. Bon Rodell, 82, died after spending 21 hours lying on a gurney in the hospital hallway, because there was no bed or staff available to treat her; and Eduard Strehling, 59, a heart patient who needed emergency treatment, but was placed on a waiting list, died a week later of multiple heart attacks.

Nor are the Nuremberg crimes confined to Victoria. Dr. Lindsay Gazal told the largest-ever conference of Australian general practitioners, in Sydney on March 16, that government budget cuts “have caused unnecessary deaths.” The conference voted overwhelmingly for a royal commission to look into the state of health care, the strongest investigative action that can be taken.