
As it’s the holiday season, and not always fun for everyone, take care of each other and stay safe. We have a big year of struggle coming.

As always, if you have feedback or questions for us, email at:
we.are.workers.solidarity@gmail.com

Climate change is union business

As a result of catastrophic bushfires in NSW, heavy smoke haze is hovering over much of the state. The air quality index in Sydney has been at the “hazardous” level for much of the past 2 weeks. On 5 December, 100 MUA members walked off the job at Port Botany. There have also been reports of electricians and construction workers downing tools; smoke detectors in office buildings being triggered forcing evacuations and pulling resources from an already overstretched fire service; and children being kept inside at lunchtime at schools and day-care centres. Climate change is not just an environmental issue, it is undoubtedly an industrial issue.

WIN: UWU - Jindi Cheese

Workers at Jindi Cheese, who we reported on in the last issue, have signed an agreement with their employer. After a 15 day strike the workers, mostly women, won a significant payrise.

RTBU - Vline

Vline workers voted to take industrial action from 11-20 December. The industrial action includes 24 hour stoppages on regional train lines, a ban on drivers performing day relief work at non-home depots, a one hour stoppage by shunters and yardies at Southern Cross, and a 24 hour ban on overtime. Up to 600 drivers, controllers and station staff will likely participate in the industrial action in their bid to secure a 6 per cent annual pay rise, as well as protecting driver training provisions, an eight-hour shift guarantee, and public-holiday loadings.

RTBU - Yarra Trams

On Thursday 5th December Yarra Trams workers took their fourth day of industrial action with a four hour stoppage from 10am - 2pm. The dispute centres on Yarra Trams wanting more part time workers while workers want to protect secure jobs and ensure a fair pay rise.
Jennifer Fang, CPSU Victoria Delegate

How long have you been a union member?

Just over a year.

Why did you join the union?

While I only recently joined the union and have just become a delegate, I had already been quite exposed to unionism and its benefits through my Mum, who was a member of the teachers' union and came from a working class family. Mum has often told me the story of how her dad (my grandfather) died of a heart attack caused by unsafe manual labour and working conditions in the 1960s. It was the union who ensured that my grandmother was compensated and looked after since she was now a widow with nine children to look after.

A more immediate reason for joining was seeing how the union was stepping in to support employees facing workplace issues such as bullying and harassment, where regular channels had failed. Being part of the union and the union movement makes me feel safe at work, as I know that they are there for me if I need them.

What’s your best memory/story about being in the union movement?

Being part of the inaugural CPSU Women of Colour Conference as a panellist this year, to discuss the systemic barriers and challenges faced by Women of Colour in the workplace, as well as some of the reasons why Women of Colour may not feel comfortable joining the union. Some of the issues we discussed included the lack of representation at senior levels, workload issues, lack of progression and development opportunities, retention issues, as well as some of the day-to-day issues that Women of Colour face in the workplace, like micro-aggressions and feeling silenced. The conference was a bit of a watershed moment as I think it was the first time a union had led a conversation about the need for cultural safety in the workplace, and the CPSU is now developing a set of recommendations for departments and agencies to action.
ANALYSIS

"The fight for penalty rates was not simply a fight for more money, but a fight to enforce limits on the working week."

Workers Solidarity acknowledges that our activities take place on Aboriginal Land. We recognise that sovereignty was never ceded.
tration Court demanded double-time on Sundays and time-and-a-half on Saturdays. The Arbitration Court conceded double-time on Sundays and time-and-a-quarter on Saturdays.

On the surface you might think unions would have been enthusiastic about the Arbitration Court’s decision, but at the time the then president of the ACTU warned that “the decision would be unsatisfactory to the union movement and it is likely to cause further discontent and unrest in industry”. Why?

In 1947 the working week was formally 44 hours—8 hours a day on Monday to Friday and a half day on Saturday. The demand for a time-and-a-half penalty on a Saturday was a demand that would enforce, and extend upon, earlier limits to the working week. A time-and-a-half penalty would push employers towards accepting a two day weekend. Time-and-a-quarter would be a lot less effective.

In its 1947 judgement, the Commonwealth Arbitration Court praised the union campaign for penalties on Sundays, with the judgement noting “the very special position of Sunday in relation to religious and family life in society” and stating that “it is necessary to mark the special sacredness and importance of Sunday”. But the court rejected these ideas in relation to Saturday. So why did the Arbitration Court grant a Saturday penalty rate at all?

The reality of industrial relations, both in 1947 and today, is that workers will rarely win a condition in a court that they cannot establish in the workplace through industrial power. The 1947 penalty rates decision occurred after decades-long industrial action and agitation. At the time the Arbitration Court handed down its decision on 1 April, railways workers, gas workers and state electricity commission workers were threatening industrial action across transport and energy infrastructure.

When employers attack penalty rates, they are not just attacking our take home pay. They are attacking limits on the working day and working week. Workers in Australia won limits on the working day, and the penalty rates to enforce those limits, through sustained industrial action in the 1930s and 1940s. The decisions handed down by courts made legal what workers were winning on the ground.

During the Christmas period, many workers will have at least a few days off to spend with family and loved ones. But in industries where bosses get away with ignoring penalty rates, or where the Fair Work Commission has now legalised this wage theft, the idea of time off with family over Christmas is steadily being eroded.

‘Tools down’
Friday Arvo Unionist Drinks
Cheap drinks and socialising for union members and organisers
16:00 – 19:00, every Friday
Common Rooms Bar, Victorian Trades Hall.

Public meeting: Wendy Brown:
In the ruins of neoliberalism
18:00, Friday 13th December
RMIT Building 80, 449 Swanston St, City.

‘We Saved Footscray Park!’
Band Night Celebration
19:00, Saturday 14th December
The Night Heron, 228 Nicholson St, Footscray.

‘Bam!’ – Asylum Seeker Resource Centre
Fundraiser Party
Punk bands and cheap drinks
20:00 onwards, Thursday 19th December
Level 1, 86-88 Hopkins St, Footscray.

Tunnerminnerwait & Maulboyheener
Commemoration: Aboriginal freedom fighters
Midday, Friday 17th January
Corner Bowen Lane & Franklin Street Melbourne.

Invasion Day Dawn Service
5:30am, Sunday 26th January
Kings Domain Resting Place, Melbourne.

Invasion Day Rally & March
Sunday 26th January
Beginning at Victorian Parliament, Spring Street (and nation-wide).

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