Today there is little debate on the reality of climate change. Oil companies like BP now ask us to join them in making ‘green’ pledges. They pretend the crisis is one we’ve all played equal part in creating and can only solve through individual consumer choices. At the same time climate disasters place workers in increasingly dangerous conditions. Workers will not put their lives on the line for industries that have ignored the science on climate for decades. Instead they will be at the center of the fight to take public control. Read on for more.

As always we welcome your feedback at:

we.are.workers.solidarity@gmail.com

WIN: UWU - Onelink

On 10 February 100 members of the United Workers Union at Onelink took strike action to demand a fair wage offer in their new EBA. Onelink is owned by the EBOS group, a multi-billion dollar company that reported almost $7 billion in profit. The medical supply workers have now won a 10% payrise over 3 years as well as improved conditions.

Hospo Voice - Dinner by Heston/Crown

On 10 February, Dinner by Heston employees held a sit at a Crown Towers following the Federal Court finding that the restaurant owed at least $10 million including $4.4 million to workers. The restaurant will be wound up as evidence showed it to be insolvent, leaving workers unpaid and unemployed. This has occurred in a bad month for hospitality workers in Melbourne as serial wage thief George Calombaris’ MaDE Estalishments restaurants closed leaving more than 400 employees in the lurch.

RTBU - Vline

RTBU members at Vline have taken more industrial action including a 4 hour stop work for shunters and yardmasters at Southern Cross on 12 February; a 24 hour stop work on the Albury, Shepparton and Seymour lines on 13 February; a 24 hour stop work on the Ballarat, Aararat and Maryborough lines on 18 February and a 24 hour stop work on the Traralgon and Bairnsdale lines on 19 February.

RTBU - Yarra Trams

More tram strikes are set to hit Melbourne. 2 four-hour stoppages are scheduled for Tuesday 3 and Thursday 5 March. And in another strategic move by the RTBU, there will be a four-hour stoppage on each of the four days of the Grand Prix (12-15 March) with trams to grind to a halt from 10-2 on the Thursday and Friday, and 12 noon – 4pm on the Saturday and Sunday. This follows strategically placed stoppages during the Australian Open.
Teishan, ASU delegate

How long have you been a union member?

3 years in the ASU, previously with the MEAA and involved in student unionism.

Why did you join the union?

Building collective power with the people that I work with has always been important to me. In the workplace an established union like the ASU can give institutional support and a recognised name to do this organising under.

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

I believe in unionism that sees itself as necessarily involved in broader social struggles. The work of the Victorian and NSW branches of the Builders Labourers Federation (BLF) in the 1970s are important and inspiring examples of this. Especially as someone concerned with environmental issues, the history of our movement helps point towards how we might engage in a properly working class environmentalism.

What’s the most important issue facing the union movement today?

The climate crisis was really brought home to many people this summer. But the driving force of the crisis, the capitalist mode of production, is not always obvious. I think the air pollution brought about by the summer bushfires gives us a way-in to this by talking about climate change and how it directly affects our health at work. While bosses force us to work in unsafe conditions and governments minimise the problem, as unionists we should be using this situation to both build power to protect our health and provide a framework for understanding the crisis.

Why should people join their union?

Organising together in the workplace is not only the best way to fight for a better deal at work, it’s also a crucial part of building the movement infrastructure we need to face the capitalist climate crisis.

ANMF - City of Melbourne

Immunisation nurses employed by the City of Melbourne are wearing campaign t-shirts and stopping work to talk to patients after the city council rejected nearly all their claims in a meeting on 30 January. They have been negotiating since March 2019, and their agreement expired in June. The nurses are seeking a 4% per annum payrise.

Wet’suwet’en Sovereign Land Defenders - Canadian government/Coastal GasLink Ltd

In British Colombia, Canada, unions including the British Columbia Federation of Teachers, the BC Government and Service Employees Union and the Canadian Union of Public Employees have announced their support for First Nations protesters opposing the construction of a pipeline on Wet’suwet’en land. Supporters of the Wet’suwet’en nation are blocking construction of the pipeline in defiance of a court injunction. Police arrests have prompted blockades of train lines in Quebec and Ontario, and attempts to blockade ports in Vancouver. The Canadian government has tried to pit unions against First Nations people by emphasising that the pipeline will create jobs. By voicing support for the Wet’suwet’en, these unions are pushing back against attempts by the government to divide workers on racist lines.

France - Mass Strikes

Following on from our update in Issue #6, France’s wave of strike action continues. The Macron government has been forced to withdraw a proposal to raise the retirement age, but workers are still angry about the proposed pension changes. Firefighters have clashed with police in the streets, council workers have picketed incinerators and stopped collecting rubbish, and workers at the Eiffel Tower shut down the iconic tourist destination for a day. Public transport unions have called for another day of strike action for February 17—the first day of debate in parliament about the proposed pension reform scheme.
The bushfires across Victoria, NSW and the ACT that have been burning since October 2019 have smothered both regional areas and cities in smoke. The air becomes hazardous to breathe when it has high levels of particulates (especially the tiny PM2.5 pollution which easily gets into our lungs and bloodstream). There’s no safe exposure level to this stuff but anybody breathing hazardous or even “very poor” air quality will likely notice negative health impacts. People with diabetes and pre-existing heart or breathing problems are especially vulnerable, as are outdoor workers doing heavy labour.

Victoria Trades Hall has developed a joint union policy telling workplace health and safety representatives to stop work if air quality becomes “very poor”, arguing that too many workers have already been exposed to dangerous smoke levels when completing non-critical, strenuous outdoor work.

In mid January when Melbourne was blanketed in hazardous smoke for two days in a row many workers walked off construction sites. The MUA walked off the docks in Sydney amongst some of the worst smoke but faced a backlash from their employer who threatened to withhold Christmas bonus pay. This was in the context of ongoing EBA negotiations but shows that bosses won’t always grant our rights to basic health and safety without a fight.

This is something that’s likely to become more important in the future as climate change means more intense and frequent days of heat and smoke. In the words of MUA branch secretary Paul McAleer, “the working class should not be forced to pay for the climate crisis”.

Strengthening organisation around OHS at work will be an important part of workers’ fight against climate change and for a just transition of our economy towards renewable energy sources and safe, sustainable, well-paid jobs for all that want them.

Capital has tried to blame workers for the climate crisis. For thirty years, we have been told that environmental destruction is our fault because we own cars or use plastic bags. But workers did not create climate change. In 2019, a mere twenty companies were responsible for a third of all the world’s carbon emissions. They are multinational and multi-billion dollar coal, gas and oil giants like Chevron, ExxonMobil and Royal Dutch Shell. Since the 1970s, these companies have known that releasing carbon dioxide into the atmosphere affects the climate yet they have continued to extract and burn fossil fuels at an ever increasing rate.

Coal production, for instance, continues to rise despite the consequent rise in greenhouse gasses, the local environmental damage caused by the mining itself, the deadly air pollution caused by burning it, and the tremendous damage done to the lives and health of workers employed in the industry.

These oil, gas and coal giants cannot or will not change. Their owners are either fabulously wealthy individuals or collections of large shareholders, and their operations are governed by a system that requires continued growth and profit.

The big polluters used to deny there was any link between carbon pollution and climate change. This position has become unsustainable. More and more, segments of capital are calling for action on climate change. In particular, banks and insurance companies are concerned about the impact that climate change could have on their bottom line.

But these institutions also have big interests in the fossil fuel industry, either as share-holders or lenders. Business does not want business to pay for the climate crisis. It is more profitable to blame workers for the climate crisis, and make the working class bear the cost of action on climate.
In December last year, oil, gas, and mining companies like Woodside Petroleum and BHP announced that they now believed climate change was a threat and called for a carbon tax.

These companies are embracing a carbon tax because a carbon tax will allow polluting companies to pass the costs of climate action onto workers through increased prices for essential goods and services.

There is another way to address the climate crisis. In the 1980s and 1990s, Victoria’s State Electricity Commission (SEC) led Australia in action to reduce carbon pollution. When the SEC closed old coal fired power stations in the La Trobe Valley, “every kilowatt was replaced by a plant built elsewhere [and] every job was secured and relocated in another section of the SEC’s Latrobe Valley operation”. In 1992 the SEC published a comprehensive plan to reduce Victoria’s carbon emissions by 20% by 2005. This plan was never implemented because the State Electricity Commission was privatised. After privatisation, Victoria’s coal fired power stations were operated for private profit, not public good. Jobs were cut, plans to transition to clean energy were scrapped, and electricity prices exploded.

Business wants to make workers pay for the climate crisis. We must fight to make business bear the costs.

Multinational energy companies have profited enough. Oil, gas and coal production must be brought under public control along with all relevant electricity generators and distributors. These industries should be run by workers according to the needs of society. Revenue from these industries can fund a transition to renewable energy, without job losses, and without impoverishing communities. This transition is what the union movement is calling “just transitions”.

For too long, polluting businesses have tried to pit workers against each other by claiming that action on climate will cost jobs. Workers need a planet that is safe to live on as well as safe, secure and well paying jobs for everyone who wants one.

Workers did not create the climate crisis, but workers’ power can save the planet. Bring polluting industries under public control so that together we can end environmental destruction for private profit.

Workers Solidarity General Meeting
All welcome to attend
18:00 - 20:00 Thursday 20 Feb
Archive Room, Victorian Trades Hall.

May 1 Movement Launch
18:00 - 20:00 Wednesday 19 Feb
MUA, 365 Sussex Street, Sydney

The Fight Against Trade Union Repression in the Asia Pacific
Special panel event hosted by the AMWU, PAUL and APHEDA.
17:30 - 19:30 Thursday 20 Feb
Meeting Room, Victorian Trades Hall
RSVP via Facebook

No U.S. Extradition: Rally for Julian Assange
18:30-21:00 Friday 21 February
State Library of Victoria

Climate Crisis: National Day of Action
Saturday, 22 February
State Library, 328 Swanson St, City
Search Facebook for more information

APHEDA’s ‘Asbestos: Not Here, Not Anywhere’ campaign update
17:30 – 19:30, Tuesday 25th February
The Last Jar (upstairs function room), Carlton RSVP via Facebook

Protest: From Manus to the Mantra: Let them out, let them stay!
14:00 Saturday, February 29
The Mantra Hotel, 215 Bell St, Preston.
Search Facebook for more information.

Women’s Rights at Work Festival
1st-8th March
unionwomen.org.au/wrawfest2020 for full list of events

International Women’s Day Rally and March
Thursday, 5 March 17:30-19:00
State Library of Victoria

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