The reality of a global pandemic has thrown capitalism into crisis, bringing the lives of working people with it. It is telling in Australia just how quickly the basic promises of abundance and convenience were abandoned once pressure was applied to the system.

In this issue we discuss the industrial dimensions to COVID-19 as well as recount the amazing struggle and victory in Queensland to reclaim Aboriginal workers’ stolen wages.

As always we welcome your feedback at: we.are.workers.solidarity@gmail.com

COVID-19 (Coronavirus)

Pandemics, such as COVID-19 are industrial issues. The ability to be able to access healthcare and paid sick leave isn't just important for individual workers, but will be vital to stop or slow the spread of disease. In Australia, the ACTU has called on the Morrison government to guarantee two weeks paid leave for all workers who are forced to either self-isolate as a result of COVID-19, or where the pandemic causes a downturn or shutdown. The Morrison Government has instead rolled out a stimulus package of one off payments to welfare recipients, as well as a suite of measures aimed at businesses. It is clear that for many workers - particularly those in precarious employment and/or with existing health issues this package will be woefully insufficient. While some businesses have stepped up and announced additional paid leave for workers impacted, many more vulnerable workers will be left to rely on the solidarity and support of their communities.

TWU - Jetstar

After a 24 hour strike on February 19, workers agreed to the proposed EBA with Jetstar on 2 March. The agreement reportedly includes a 12% pay rise over four years, and some improvements to rostering and allowances. The TWU has said that workers were “blackmailed” by management into voting up the EBA, with threats they would miss out on getting rate increases owed from March 2019 if they didn't sign the deal. TWU National Secretary Michael Kaine criticised the intimidation and said “It is not easy to stand up at your workplace along with your mates and say no to your manager. Jetstar workers did this for as long as they could but for low-paid workers the prospect of being denied money from a rate increase that was due a year ago was too much.”

AEU - SA Public Schools

Just before Christmas, a slim majority of AEU members in South Australia voted yes to the
Marshall Government’s offer. This follows 18 months of negotiations, including teachers taking strike action last year. The agreement includes salary increases of 2.55% for teachers and 3.5% for Principals and Preschool Directors. All workers covered by the agreement were balloted in February with a majority voting yes. AMEU SA President Lara Golding said “Every improvement in the Offer since June was hard won from a Government who appears disinterested in supporting public education... We are putting the Marshall Government on notice, particularly around issues that have not been adequately addressed.”

Amcu/ETU/UWU - Australian Paper

The dispute at Australian Paper continues. The AMCU announced on social media that combined stoppages and phone bans were starting from March 7. The dispute has been going on since at least September last year.

Amcu – SPC

Workers at the SPC factory in Shepparton took protected industrial action on March 6 & 9 as part of their EBA campaign. SPC and the AMCU have been in negotiations since August to keep their existing conditions, and get a basic cost of living adjustment. The AMCU have attempted to cut over fifty conditions from the agreement. As the protected action came closer, SPC tried to capitalise on the panic buying caused by the coronavirus, calling the action “selfish and self-serving”. With the action consisting of 3 short stoppages and an overtime ban on a public holiday, the AMCU was quick to retract that any significant loss of product is due to the poor season, not industrial action.

Teachers Union of Malawi - Malawi Government

After four days of strike action, the Teachers Union of Malawi has forced the government to pay unpaid salaries. A monumental government stuff up caused thousands of public school teachers to not receive their December 2019 salaries. Following the error, and the government’s reluctance to fix the problem in a timely fashion, the Teachers Union of Malawi has called for a nationwide, indefinite strike. Teachers who have participated in the strike, and were joined in solidarity actions at SPC have attempted to cut over fifty conditions from the agreement. As the protected action came closer, SPC tried to capitalise on the panic buying caused by the coronavirus, calling the action “selfish and self-serving”. With the action consisting of 3 short stoppages and an overtime ban on a public holiday, the AMCU was quick to retract that any significant loss of product is due to the poor season, not industrial action.

Emma Beale

Australian Education Union

Rank and file member, previously sub-branch Representative and President.

How long have you been a union member?

11 years.

Why did you join the union?

I joined the union because I believe in the collective power of working people to improve conditions and outcomes for everyone.

I was finishing primary school as Jeff Kennett came into power in Victoria. My mum was a teacher, lots of family and friends were teachers. I saw the state school system being decimated. I saw my future high school shut down and all my sister’s teachers lose their jobs.

But my mum, my teachers, my schools – they fought back. We occupied vacant schools to prevent sales to developers and keep them in government hands. I witnessed the power of thousands of workers striking together. The euphoria that comes from collective action – knowing how powerful we are together.

They didn’t give in. AUU members have slowly rebuilt teacher rights and entitlements, and continue to fight tooth and nail to stop our rights being eroded again. Fighting for our rights, fighting for our students and schools to receive proper resources, fighting along-side other unions to improve workplace rights in Australia.

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

One of my best memories took place during the 2011-2013 EBA dispute with the Baillieu/Napthine government. We managed to grow our sub-branch from 30% to 100% teacher members and many of our members took strike action, closing the school for the very first time. It was an amazing achievement that I felt really proud of. For the first strike we made our own banner. We thought it was pretty great, but after the rain came down the cardboard letters all peeled off, one by one! But it didn’t matter to us – we were proud to be there together, representing our workplace and our union, and standing up for better rights and entitlements in the school system.

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

The most important issue facing the union movement is the ignorance in Australian society around the value of collective action and the history of union achievements. Workers take for granted all the hard-won conditions and employer duties, potential hardship due to employer duties, potential hardship due to

Although there have been only three deaths as a result of coronavirus in Australia, it is highly likely that the number of people infected by the disease will increase. Currently, the coronavirus COVID-19 is affecting 76 countries and territories around the world and the international convoy (the Diamond Princess cruise ship harboured in Yokohama, Japan).

There are many issues for workers: the illness itself, OH&S risks and consequences, employer duties, potential hardship due to employment status and leave entitlements, and many others.

COVID-19 is a virus in the same family as the common cold. It is passed between people by contact with droplets from the lungs of the infected person, either in the air or on surfaces.

Unlike influenzas, there is currently no vaccine and therefore the prevention of the spread of the virus can only be achieved by isolating cases and the practice of good respiratory and hand hygiene.

Employers have a general duty of care, that is a legal obligation, under Victoria’s OHS Act to ensure the health and safety of employees and others. This includes to:

- Provide and maintain, so far as is reasonably practicable, a working environment for employees that is safe and without risks to health – including a safe workplace and systems of work
- Provide information and training to workers
- Monitor the health of employees

So, employers need to be implementing measures now to ensure the risks of contagion and contamination are minimised. These include:

- Identifying risks particular to the specific workplace/work environment and implementing measures to control these risks. These measures should include a policy regarding when and in what circumstances workers should not attend work (self-quarantine for 14 days)
- Ensuring workplaces are clean and hygienic
- Ensuring good respiratory and hand hygiene
- Providing adequate information and training to all workers
- Consulting with elected health and safety representatives (EHRs) when identifying, assessing and controlling the risks, and providing all relevant information. If there are no elected EHRs, the employer must consult directly with workers.

Now is the time to raise this issue with employers, to ensure that appropriate actions and plans are in place.

And as always, workers won’t win anything without a fight. So if we want that workers must not pay for the COVID-19 pandemic, we won’t get this simply by asking- we must organise, mobilise and fight.

For more detailed OHS information, go to oharep.org.au and search for ‘Coronavirus’. For more information and advice on the ‘industrial’ issues associated with COVID-19, workers need to contact their union.

Workers Solidarity acknowledges that our activities take place on Aboriginal Land. We recognize that sovereignty was never ceded.
Join us online for the launch of the

**MAY 1ST MOVEMENT**

An interactive live-stream

**Tuesday 24 March 6 PM**

**Speakers**

**Luba Grigorovitch**
Victorian Secretary Rail, Tram & Bus Union

**Colin Long**
Just Transitions Organiser, Victoria Trades Hall Council

**Paul McAleer**
Sydney Branch Secretary Maritime Union of Australia

Check for updates & more details on Workers Solidarity’s social media

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**“Stolen Wages Built This State!”**

You may have heard about a victory for thousands of workers in the middle of last year. It came when the Queensland government settled a class action lawsuit brought on behalf of the estimated 10,000 Aboriginal workers whose wages were stolen by the state government. This win will see that $190 million is set aside to repay those workers still living, or their families, a portion of what they are owed. The mammoth legal case, the fifth-largest class action suit to ever be won in Australia, took 12 years to build and its victory was widely reported. What has received little attention is the much longer fight for justice that got it there.

Since colonization the lives of Aboriginal people have been tightly controlled and monitored, most explicitly under various ‘protection acts’. These laws gave vast powers to an assortment of white managerial types, directed to act in the supposed best interests of Aboriginal people. Protectors, superintendents, managers, ministers, police and judges, at their own discretion, could interpret and enforce the laws that governed where Aboriginal people could be, who they could interact with, where they could live and what they could buy.

The protection laws were a key part of the government’s campaign of genocide and forced assimilation of Aboriginal people. They were put in place to, in their words, ‘smooth the dying pillow’ of a people they thought would soon be wiped out. (The similarity between the purported aims of the protection laws and the justifications for recent child removals and intervention is striking.) They incentivized so-called ‘half-castes’ to cut off all ties to their Aboriginal families and communities, the only way to free themselves from the government’s control. Queensland’s laws would go on to inspire the framework of South Africa’s apartheid regime.

The acts also mandated that the wages of Aboriginal workers were to be heavily garnished and put into government trusts for safekeeping. Officially, wage theft was law from 1897 to 1972 in Queensland, though some say it was for much longer. Under Queensland’s ‘Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act ’897, on average three-fourths of a worker’s wage was taken, leaving little more than enough money for rations. Years later, when workers returned to claim their money, it was gone or only a pittance was there to be paid. Where did the money go? Not into the communities from which it was stolen. In the peak years of Queensland’s development, the state thrived on this system of double-exploitation: extracting hard labour from Aboriginal workers usually living on reserves and in rural communities, then putting the worker’s earnings back into the development and infrastructure of the state’s cities.

**Where The Fight Happens**

It took some time to understand the scale of what had happened in Queensland because there had been systematic destruction of these government and private enterprise records. Investigations into the theft of Aboriginal wages began in the early ’900’s during the premiership of Wayne Goss. What they eventually found was that the Aborigines Welfare Fund which held the stolen wages was used as a government piggybank. The workers’ money was liberally applied towards the state’s debts and to fund government initiatives from the Native Affairs Department. When the welfare fund was frozen in 1995, only a slim $5 million remained. Negotiations began with the government but led nowhere.

**“Years of direct action from Aboriginal activists showed that struggle on the ground could produce results.”**

Around the same time several legal cases were successfully prosecuted against the Queensland government for systematically paying workers on Aboriginal reserves under-award wages. As a result, the government had to pay a flat fee of $7000 to each complainant and admit to discriminatory behavior.

The Queensland Aboriginal & Islander Legal Service Secretariat (QALSS) began building a case against the state. They found and interviewed over 2,000 workers who were eager to press ahead with a class-action suit.
Fearing another court case, the government began negotiations with QAILSS. These talks would periodically break down and resume over the next several years. The final QAILSS proposal was for a settlement that would see $180 million dollars in payments made to workers, a conservative estimate of what was owed. In 2002 the Queensland government counter-presented QAILSS with a final, take-it-or-leave-it scheme entitled ‘Without Prejudice’. The offer: workers could be eligible for somewhere between $2000 and $4000 in compensation for their stolen wages, but in exchange they must sign away their rights to any more of the money they were due. Under labor premier Peter Beattie, $55 million was set aside for the task, about one-tenth of the estimated amount of stolen wealth. Beattie called the offer ‘generous’. The characterization seemed to suggest these payments were a gesture towards reconciliation, an olive branch from a more compassionate government. But you can’t gift people what they are owed.

Years of direct action from Aboriginal activists showed that struggle on the ground could produce results. Campaigns for land rights, self-determination, equal pay, health and housing were spearheaded by activists like Don Brady, Denis Walker, Steve Man, Sam Watson, Cheryl Buchanan, Marlene Cunin, Bunnie Chilly, Lynelda Gia and many more. The Australian Black Panthers, the Aboriginal Tent Embassies and Tribal Councils were all sources of community self-governance and support, working outside the legal system to effectively build solidarity and power. Historic actions like the 1946 Pilbara Pastoral Workers’ strike demonstrated what a strong, sustained industrial pushback looked like. An essential part of this fight for stolen wages was going to be bringing the unions into the campaign. As Indigenous rights activist and member of the Queensland Stolen Wages Campaign Working Group Tiga Bayles noted, “Stolen wages is an industrial issue, not a welfare issue”.

Petitions, rallies and council meetings followed. Activists were getting the word out in Queensland but efforts were starting to flag in the face of government indifference, as Beattie refused to budge. In late 2002 an executive meeting of the Queensland Council of Unions (QCU) passed a resolution calling on the government to renegotiate with the workers and noting that the deal as it stood was ‘inadequate’. The resolution was supported by members of Australia Asia Worker Links to bring Alif Lacey, executive member for the Queensland working group to speak to unionists at the Victorian Trades Hall and the South Australian United Trades and Labor Council. These talks forged links between the states and revitalized the call for stolen wage justice as a national issue, leading to the formation of working groups in capital cities across Australia.

Back in Queensland, the Council of Unions came on board. Together with the QCU, individual unions and ANTaR, the Queensland working group coordinated a massive informational post campaign. The cards, divided into three parts, detailed the legacy of stolen wages including personal accounts, addressed the insult of the ‘Without Prejudice’ offer and asked Queenslanders for support to mount a long-term fight.

Meanwhile, at annual meetings of the Queensland Labour Party, members passed resolutions that committed the party to re-evaluating the payout scheme. In the years that followed, as resolutions to the same effect were continually ratified in good faith at party meetings, the Beattie government failed to implement them. Attempts to lobby politicians were made with some success, but many were stonewalled. After a budget submission from the Queensland Stolen Wages Campaign Working Group was rejected by the government, the group developed their own survey to gauge public opinion. The surveys were printed by a coalition of some on-board local MPs, a few members of parliament including Kevin Rudd, and the NTEU. Campaigners distributed the survey widely across the state. It included questions like “Do you think the Queensland Government’s payment offer as it now stands is fair?” Most respondents were not impressed.

Pushing Through

The phrase “Stolen Wages Built This State”, coined by executive working group member Victor Hart, was printed on stickers and shirts accompanying the Aboriginal flag. It was written on signs displayed at rallies and pickets with help from the unions. The Queensland working group put out regular updates on the fight and appeals for information and assistance through flyers. They developed and deployed information kits and talking points that illustrated what the campaign was about to be shared with comrades from other struggles. There were inter-
state meetings between stolen wages groups to coordinate national campaigns. Unions like the Queensland Nurses Union, engaged in their own fights with the Beattie government, had a heightened sense of camaraderie with the stolen wages campaigners and pushed their members to get involved. This was all happening in the background of working people’s lives, over years and years. The continual call for justice kept the issue from being swept under the rug by a government eager for the whole thing to be over.

In short the campaigners did the hard work that needed to be done, the work that looks like a lot of our industrial campaigns. They persisted in taking direct action to create and sustain a broad movement of support. The win in the court is the culmination of all of their work on the ground. From the early battles in the 50’s 60’s and 70’s, to the formation of the first working group in 2002 until the legal victory in 2019, activists never lost sight of the goal.

While the case is won, the rightful recipients are still waiting for their money in Queensland and lots and lots of workers and their families have died during the battle that will never see their money. The government says they are aware that the advanced age of the living complainants means they must hurry and are working to speed up the process of paying out the settlements. Almost a year on, you might wonder how many more workers will pass away before the payments arrive. The vigilance of thousands delivered this victory and it’ll take more vigilance still to see it through. The fight for Aboriginal justice continues.

A large number of previously advertised public events have been cancelled or rescheduled because of the pandemic. The following events may also end up being postponed, so please check with the organisers via social media closer to the date before attending. Or you may choose not to go, in order to prioritize public health.

‘Stateless: Detention hasn’t changed’:
Public Forum
Monday 23rd March 18:30-20:30
ANMF House, 536 Elizabeth St, Melbourne

United We Stand- Unions and Refugees Together
Free workshop
13:30 - 17:30 Saturday 18 April
Victorian Trades Hall

International Workers Day
May 1 Movement Rally
Friday May 1st 11:00
Belmore Park – near Central Station, Sydney

Launch of the May 1st Movement
Tuesday March 26, 18:00
Interactive live-stream forum
Follow Workers Solidarity for more information and updates

Bendigo Trades Hall Library Launch
Saturday May 2nd, 18:00-21:00

Some things to do at home, for people self-quarantining:

Listen to 3CR’s Stick Together
https://www.3cr.org.au/sticktogether

Films for Action
Database of free movies
https://www.filmsforaction.org/
Search: ‘unions’

People’s History of Australia Podcast
New interview series