Working people are doing it rough right now. Layoffs are being announced in the thousands and whole industries wiped out, while workers in what are now acknowledged as ‘essential’ services are pushed to their breaking point. While COVID-19 might have been the catalyst for immediate system meltdown it can’t be the scapegoat for a recession that was already underway. Read on for more.

Please note that by the time you read this issue some details may have changed.

As always we welcome your feedback at:

we.are.workers.solidarity@gmail.com

Stand Downs

Major stand downs include:

- 19 March - Qantas announced that 20,000 workers, the majority of its workforce, would be stood down until at least the end of May. Qantas received a $715 million rescue package from the government days before the stand down.

- 20 March - Woodside stood down 400 contract employees from the Goodwyn and North Rankin platforms, along with Woodside floating production storage and offloading units. Woodside had a $1.3 billion profit in 2018.

- 25 March - Virgin Australia announced that 90% of its workforce, 8,000 workers would be stood down until at least the end of May. Virgin Australia, one of Australia’s top 10 corporate tax avoiders, had revenue of $5.8 billion in 2019.

25 March - Mosaic Brands Ltd (which owns brands including Noni B, Katies

Workers Solidarity acknowledges that our activities take place on Aboriginal Land.
We v that sovereignty was never ceded.
Frontline Workers

Workers on the front lines of this pandemic - teachers, nurses, and supermarket staff - are reminding us that the most important work in society is performed mostly by women, with low wages and tough conditions.

Teachers have been agitating for either partial or full school closures. Many teachers have felt abandoned as they have been told to practice social distancing in overcrowded classrooms, and to keep up hygiene without necessary supplies or PPE. Teachers’ unions have called for governments to ensure safe working conditions and an end to the uncertainty. At the time of writing, there is no consistent position across the country on school closures.

Meanwhile, nurses are gearing up for the peak of the pandemic. The AMWU has called for the Government to prioritise sufficient supplies of PPE for health workers, while reminding them that the decisions to cut hospital and health funding and jobs “starkly show the gaps they leave in our society when we have to deal with an emergency.”

Finally, supermarket workers dealing with unprecedented demands for basic grocery items are caught between their already tough working conditions, and a panicked general public. Many of these workers are casual, with poor wages and conditions, and in constant contact with the general public. Demands for additional leave for workers who contract COVID-19 are especially relevant for this group of workers.

Italy

The COVID-19 pandemic has hit Italy particularly hard. For hospital workers, the legacy of cuts to public health spending, hospital beds, and medical personnel is causing desperate scenes at the forefront of the crisis, including a severe lack of PPE. For workers more broadly, prior to the government imposing a shutdown on March 11, bosses were insisting on business as usual, and asking that emergency health measures and safety, protection of income, the closing of all non-essential jobs and strikes and mobilisations against bosses who refuse to comply.

No worker should go without wages, whilst these companies still have money.

Dirk van Dale
CPMHEU Construction Division
Rank and file member

How long have you been a union member?

5 years in the CPMHEU, previously 4 years in an English teachers’ union (ECCEU) in Japan, and 2 years in the EDA before that.

Why did you join the union?

I was lucky to be raised in a household with strong union values (Dad was BLF/CFMEU). Growing up hearing stories of the strength and protection organised workers can have, when my time to work came joining the union was a no-brainer.

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

When ever I get that feeling that comes from the collective strength of workers being united. I felt it at the first Change the Rules rally of 700,000 people that shut down the city in May 2018. And I felt it when I lived and worked in Japan as one of about 50 English teachers that went on strike and forced down a pay freeze from the company. Big numbers or small, workers have power when we are united!

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

Rebuilding rank and file strength and collective action against the money and power of the boss or company. Unions can only be as strong as the members that make them up. We need to get away from a top down “union as a service” method of organising, and not rely on parliamentary parties to solve our problems. The power of the union lies in the workers, not the halls of parliament.

Why should people join their union?

As an individual worker we are weak and hopeless against the money and power of the boss or company. But when workers come together in a union we have protection, strength, and solidarity. It might sound like a cliché but it’s true – “United we stand, divided we fall”.

OHS Matters

Reading over the previous edition’s OHS column on COVID-19 as this item was being written, it became starkly clear how quickly things are changing – and for the worse. On March 10 coronavirus had affected 118 countries and territories with 716 cases and three deaths in Australia.

By March 25 – just two weeks later – the virus is in 197 countries and Australia now has 2,370 cases and now eight deaths. And these figures are increasing daily.

While this is nothing compared to Italy’s over 69,000 cases and almost 7,000 deaths, extreme measures need to be taken. Finally they have – with the general message that one of the best ways of controlling the spread of COVID-19 is drastically cutting back contact with others in the community, most venues where people gather to eat, exercise, be entertained or worship are now closed, no international visitors may enter the country and there are even controls on travel within Australia. In addition to this, hundreds of thousands of workers, apart from those in “essential services” are now working from home.

While this will help control the spread of the virus, from an OHS point of view there are implications for those who are ‘teleworking’. Working from home can obviously put workers at risk due to inappropriate/unergonomic equipment and work stations. But harder to identify and address is that these workers will be in far less contact with colleagues (whose contact with friends and others has already been drastically reduced). For some this could bring about feelings of anxiety or disconnection.

The employer’s duty of care under s25 of the OHS Act (and similarly under WHS Acts in other jurisdictions) still applies when an employee is working at home. Employers cannot abrogate their legal duties when workers move off-site.

“Employers cannot abrogate their legal duties when workers move off-site.”
The employer must take steps to ensure that the employee’s health (including psychological health) and safety are safeguarded by introducing measures to that end before the lockdown – so far as is reasonably practicable. There are a number of things employers need to do:

- Assess the physical space, work station set up, equipment and so on
- Provide any necessary equipment – at no cost to the worker
- Ensure that the work allocated is appropriate and achievable
- Take steps to ensure the worker’s psychological health
- Monitor the worker’s health and safety

The employer must take steps to ensure that the worker’s health and safety are safeguarded by introducing measures to eliminate/minimise the risks – so station set up, equipment and so on. Without the

*ANALYSIS*

For more detailed information and links, go to the following resources:

- ACTU: Coronavirus resource page
- www.actu.org.au/coronavirus
- Search for Teleworking and Coronavirus
- www.ohsrep.org.au
- ACTU: Coronavirus resource page

In 2019, before the outbreak of COVID-19, global economic growth was already slowing. Australia was already in a retail recession, and wages growth had already stalled. By August 2019 economic indicators already pointed to a recession at some point in 2020, and the business press was reporting that they expected a recession before 2021. A recession would have happened without the pandemic. Why?

The global economic system is unstable. The fundamental crisis is one of overproduction. Capitalist firms race to produce more and sell more at lower prices in order to gain a larger market share and larger overall profits. Eventually this reaches a limit: capitalism produces too much, there are not enough buyers, and goods can no longer be sold at a profit. This causes a crisis, capitalist firms sack workers, cut production, and unprofitable businesses go bankrupt. This is called a "recession".

In the period since the financial crisis of 2008, governments and central banks have attempted to prop up the profitability of business. The record low interest rates adopted during the global financial crisis became permanent. Governments attacked wages and slashed taxes to keep capital profitable. Ever greater subsidies have been poured into business, and workers have gone into ever greater debt. It was clear, before COVID-19 hit, that these measures had reached their limit and that the house of cards was starting to fall apart.

The measures that governments have implemented to prop up business profitability over the past thirty years are making the COVID-19 crisis so much worse. The social infrastructure that we all need to get through this crisis has been hollowed out by decades of cuts, privatisation, contracting out and just-in-time management. There isn’t the capacity to deal with an unexpected crisis, because manufacturing, warehousing and logistics simply don’t have the spare capacity anywhere. To help shore up the social safety net and critical infrastructure, privatisation has also created many individual little systems, which lack the capacity to scale up, or even integrate effectively.

Another thing to notice about the current economic situation is that while many industries are going under, some are going through the roof. The IT industry, food production, internal logistics (trucks, courier services and warehouses), are all experiencing unprecedented increases in demand. Yet none of the skyrocketing profits experienced by these companies are being transferred to the workers. In fact, food industry and supermarket workers are amongst the most precarious and most poorly paid in this country. Again, the workers always pay.

So as we plunge into a recession, and with a real and serious health pandemic in full swing, what do we do and how do we respond?

States of emergency allow for additional powers of arrest, uses of force, and nationalisation measures – among others. Interestingly, most governments are focusing on the use of force measures.

Although the state of emergency includes the capacity to repurpose certain industries, Scott Morrison and all of the state premiers have been slow to call for decisive action in repurposing parts of our industry to respond to the crisis. They have been slow and inconsistent when calling for the repurposing of factories to manufacture personal protective equipment (PPE), even though medical practitioners are yelling from the rooftops that there is a dire shortage of these. As of writing, they have not called for the immediate manufacturing of coronavirus testing kits, in order to dramatically increase testing so that we can ascertain the breadth and scale of the problem here. They are still dithering on their statements about calling for the repurposing of emptied government buildings to provide immediate health care to those with COVID-19, and to ease the pressure on an already over-stretched health care system.

We know that the situation is changing almost daily, and by the time we go to publish, some of the actions we have mentioned might be taken. By way of example, the government of all Premiers and the Prime Minister has been less decisive about the actions that will actually make a difference to the spread of COVID-19, and very decisive about the controls on people’s movements.

At best, the State of Emergency will be used to police people’s implementation of the social-distancing requirements, with the threat of exorbitant and repressive fines in the order of tens of thousands of dollars. At worst, the State of Emergency will not be lifted when the COVID-19 crisis is over – because the recession won’t yet be over, and there must be a means to prevent the workers from revolt.

So, how do we respond?

Workers’ demands are clear, and they have been outlined by many unions and working class organisations in many countries:

1. **No job losses. No sackings for any reason.**
2. **Provide unlimited emergency wage assistance. Pay the full wages of all workers, regardless of the amount of hours they are currently working:** All workers in quarantine, all workers whose workplaces are closed, and all workers who are ill must continue to receive their regular wages.
3. **Provide adequate income support to all pensioners, all students**
and all other people in society without any queues or bureaucratic hurdles, through a universal basic income payment

4. No evictions for any reasons. No utility disconnections for any reason. Provide immediate emergency accommodation to homeless people using spare hospitality industry accommodation

5. Support and refinance the health industry, employing as many additional support workers as required, nationalising private health companies without compensation if required

6. Reorganise industry production to achieve a safe environment for all workers still at work. Increase production and distribution of necessities, nationalising them without compensation if required

7. Introduce emergency taxes on all large corporations, nationalising them without compensation if required

8. No deportations, no detention for migrant workers and undocumented workers, even if their visas expire. Appropriate accommodation for all migrant and undocumented workers. Free and appropriate healthcare for all migrant and undocumented workers.

We must continue to organise. But we need to use different methods. The reality of COVID-19 is that it is highly contagious and we must keep ourselves fit and healthy to live and to fight.

New technologies that allow for videoconferencing and electronic forms of interacting will be essential, but we must not fool ourselves into thinking that online activism is just as effective as actual industrial action. Pressure on the capitalists, organised around a set of global workers’ demands (because the economy and the recession are global), is what we need. We hope that you will be able to participate in our upcoming online meetings, we will publish details soon.

Solidarity. Fight to win.

In light of COVID-19 and efforts by community members to self isolate, almost all political meetings and rallies have been either cancelled or postponed for the foreseeable future. A lot of energy has moved into digital spaces. While it is absolutely vital that we continue discussions, campaigns and organising efforts as much as possible while we are physically cut off from one another, we are wary of a false equivalence emerging - between online activism and activism that takes place in our workplaces, on the streets and in other physical spaces.

We have to find ways to build collective strength and discipline in this time, so that when we emerge from the current crises, we are able to articulate our power.

Online forum: Coronavirus: Refugees & Unionists Organising Together
Tuesday 31st March 18:00 - 19:30
Search Facebook for details

Car Cavalcade: From Manus to the Mantra: Set Them Free! - Rally 2
Saturday 4th April 14:00 - 16:00
Mantra Bell City, 215 Bell street, Preston
Search Facebook for details and updates

Coronavirus: Don’t make uni staff pay!
NTEU Online Petition
https://www.megaphone.org.au/petitions/coronavirus-don-t-make-uni-staff-pay

Coronavirus - A guaranteed wage subsidy to save jobs now!
ACTU Online Petition

Some further things to do at home:

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