

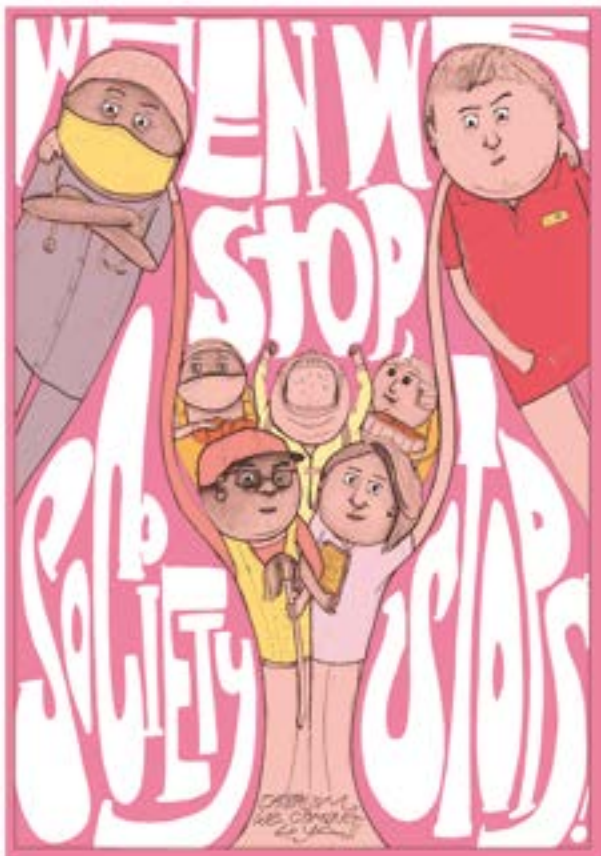
WORKERS SOLIDARITY

BULLETIN · ISSUE 13

As the fight to protect ourselves and each other from COVID-19 continues we must stay vigilant on many fronts. In Australia we've already seen inconsistent and discriminatory application of the poorly defined emergency powers by police, and the government's decision to pay JobKeeper payments directly to businesses, rather than the workers, sets up a system ripe for exploitation.

Governments and bosses worldwide will try to take advantage of the unprecedented scale and pace of this pandemic for their own ends. But where there is resistance from workers battles are being won.

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Tia Kass

WORKERS IN STRUGGLE

TWU - Qantas

Qantas and CEO Alan Joyce have been served with a notice of formal investigation by SafeWork NSW. It is alleged that a cleaner and HSR raised concerns about workers being exposed to COVID-19 in the course of their work. The worker in question was stood down on February 2 and Qantas has refused to reinstate them. SafeWork has subsequently issued Improvement Notices reflecting the airline's "inadequate system of work used to clean planes" with aircraft cleaners forced to wipe tray tables with the same dirty cloths and handle blood, vomit, soiled nappies, used masks and tissues without protective gear. Around 50 Qantas workers have now tested positive for COVID-19.

MUA - DP World

More than 60 workers took part in cease work action under the OHS Act on 31st March & 1st April after deciding that a ship was too great a risk to unload due to COVID-19 concerns. The workers were subsequently stood down by DP World. The workers identified the vessel as a risk to workers and the community, as it docked in breach of the Federal Government's 14-day corona-virus quarantine period. National Assistant Secretary Warren Smith said that the MUA would continue to demand "more proactive biosecurity measures and testing for workers and crew of international vessels... and support for sick crew members."

ASU - City Councils

Local Government workers right around the country have been some of the first workers to be stood down in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Some of these stand downs have been done cruelly - such as via video message or late night emails. Council workers will also not be eligible to access JobKeeper payments from the Federal Government. Unions and workers are fighting to have stood down workers reinstated; and to ensure that workers who are stood down or who lose their jobs can access government assistance. While some council work-

ers are still doing their jobs - shout out to our garbage truck drivers! -other workers like librarians and rec centre staff can't work due to social distancing. Meanwhile, child care workers and home care assistants need support, PPE, guaranteed hours and pay.

CARe Convoy

On 9 April, unionists in Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane participated in car convoys, demanding a job and income guarantee for all workers. The action took place one day after the JobKeeper legislation passed in Parliament, leaving over a million casual and migrant workers without support.

Undocumented Migrants

Approximately 60-100,000 undocumented migrant workers work in dangerous, low paid and essential roles in Australia's fresh food supply chains and other industries. Undocumented Migrants Solidarity are demanding an amnesty for undocumented migrants, an end to deportations and detention, and that healthcare and income support be extended to all workers, regardless of visa status.

Federation of Trade Unions of Burma - Garment Factories

On 3 April around 1500 garment workers from 4 factories in Yangon held a demonstration demanding that the factory owners temporarily close down the plants as a preventative measure to stop the spread of COVID-19 and give workers paid leave. More than 20,000 workers have lost their jobs in factories in Myanmar due to shortages of raw materials caused by the breakdown of global supply chains during the pandemic. Those who continue to work, despite a wide spread lockdown, are increasingly concerned about their health. A representative from the Federation of Trade Unions said "We are now demanding to negotiate with the boss. We are appealing to him to shut down the factory for the entire month of April and pay wages and salaries for this month."

Industrial Division of Communication Workers of America - General Electric

On 30 March, workers at an aviation factory in Massachusetts walked off the job and demanded GE convert its jet engine factories to make ventilators. GE's healthcare division is one of the major manufacturers of ventilators in the US - and the workers believe the aviation facilities could be utilised to produce the much needed, life saving machines. The protests follow GE announcing it would be laying off 10% of its aviation workforce, firing 2600 workers along with a temporary layoff of 50% of its maintenance workers. The workers at GE remind us that workers can solve the problems of the world, if only the bosses would get out of our way.

BACKBONE OF OUR MOVEMENT



Anastasia Kanjere
NTEU Delegate La Trobe branch; Rank and file member Navitas and Monash branches

How long have you been a union member?

I've been a casual academic for longer than the NTEU has really noticed that we are a workforce to engage with. I officially became a member in 2014.

Why did you join the union?

Honestly, part of the answer is: I don't want to be a scab. Casual membership became available and I joined. At that stage, the NTEU's position on casuals was still pretty woeful but it's important to me to be able to stick up for myself and other workers, and any opportunity to do that I wanted to be there.

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

As a delegate, it's a pretty amazing feeling when workers come to you with worries and uncertainty and you are able to support them and remind them that they have the right to dignity at work, and people to back them up if they are not shown that. With the seismic changes happening in tertiary education (and all over) with COVID-19, I've been having a lot of those conversations recently and that's the reason I became a delegate. Casual university workers



are extremely isolated anyway, and dignity at work - even understanding themselves as workers - is very hard to achieve. Having a union structure that is explicitly able to speak to what casuals are dealing with has been pretty amazing through these last few weeks.

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

I think the extreme failure of the Australian left as a broader movement is a big issue. There are some unions doing wonderful things, but so far as we can only tap into the bitter disappointments that are the ALP and the ACTU I think our achievements will always be curtailed.

Why should people join their union?

Because a) they're still the best way to fight for our working conditions, and b) they desperately need to be radicalised.

“Risk needs to be assessed and mitigated with consideration of the characteristics of the worker, the workplace and the work”

“Is it true that with the current situation with Covid-19 workers over 60 years of age should be sent home from the workplace as they are more likely to be vulnerable than others?”

An individual may be more vulnerable for any number of reasons, and being older is one of these if the person's health is not very good. However this is not to say that all 60 year old workers are in this category, particularly if they are well. Recently the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee (AHPPC), which advises the Australian Government on health, aged care and sport, recommended special provisions be applied to vulnerable people in the workplace. This is an excerpt from the AHPPC statement:

“AHPPC considers that, based on the limited current evidence, the following people are, or are likely to be, at higher risk of serious illness if they are infected with the virus:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people 50 years and older with one or more chronic medical conditions
- People 65 years and older with chronic medical conditions. The most current list of 'chronic medical conditions' can be accessed on the Department of Health website (health.gov.au)
- People 70 years and older
- People with compromised immune systems (see DoH website)

AHPPC recommends that where vulnerable workers undertake essential work, a risk assessment must be undertaken. Risk needs to be assessed and mitigated with consideration of the characteristics of the worker, the workplace and the work. This includes ensuring vulnerable people are redeployed to non-customer-based roles where possible. Where risk cannot be appropriately mitigated, employers and employees should consider alternate arrangements to accommodate a workplace absence.

AHPPC recommends that special provisions apply to essential workers who are at higher risk of serious illness and, “where the risk cannot be sufficiently mitigated, should not work in high risk setting.”

OHS MATTERS

Workers who find themselves in this position should meet with the employer (with their union delegate or other support person) to:

- 1 Discuss the AHPPC advice
- 2 Undertake an audit of all work to determine what can be moved off-site, and that arrangements be made that everyone who can work remotely do so. This will reduce the risk of infection for all workers and is what the government is now recommending (see the Coronavirus (COVID-19) hazard information page on ohsrep.org.au). It also means the employer ensures compliance with duties under the Act (see: Teleworking - or working from home, also on the website)
- 3 For work that cannot be taken off-site, an audit of the workers doing this work to determine whether any are at serious risk according to the AHPPC advice
- 4 On the basis of this audit, seek the redeployment of vulnerable workers to ensure they no longer work in a high-risk setting

By law the employer must consult with any HSRs. HSRs consult with members of their Designated Work Groups (DWG) both before and after the meeting with the employer. Make sure they are aware of the AHPPC advice and let you know if they believe they are at increased risk. If necessary, they should seek advice from their doctor. Always call your union if you have workplace issues.

Migrant & Undocumented Workers Struggle Worldwide

ANALYSIS

The COVID-19 pandemic has left migrant workers across the world in a precarious state. In India, millions of migrant workers have been locked out of their workplaces in the face of a government imposed shutdown. Faced with possible starvation in India's industrial cities and the shutdown of vital transportation infrastructure, migrant workers are trekking the hundreds of kilometres back to home villages on foot. In Qatar two million migrant workers, many employed in the construction boom in preparation for the 2022 World Cup, already live in cramped work camps without access to proper sanitation, health care or adequate nutrition. As Qatar now reports 2000 COVID-19 cases, a humanitarian crisis is looming. In Australia, the federal government's JobKeeper legislation has excluded most casual workers and over a million migrant workers from necessary income protection.

Borders around the world are closing and it is simply not possible for migrant workers to 'go home' as the government suggests. Without access to income support and healthcare, migrant workers face hunger and homelessness on top of the pandemic. Undocumented migrant workers face even greater dangers.

In Australia, an estimated 60-100,000 undocumented workers work across the entire economy- on farms, in abattoirs, in warehouses and factories, and in constructing critical transport and infrastructure as well as in other industries. Bosses use the threat of reporting to authorities and deportation to exploit and control undocumented workers. These workers are unable to access necessary healthcare and are hesitant to demand necessary PPE in the face of the coronavirus pandemic.

The virus knows no borders and does not discriminate on the basis of visa or citizenship status. Anything that prevents any group of workers from ensuring their safety in this pandemic is ultimately a threat to all workers. No one should be forced to choose between the risk of infection or the certainty of starvation, and we are all endangered when they are. To fight this virus detentions and deportations must stop, and migrant workers everywhere, from India and Qatar to Australia, need full access to the healthcare system, secure accommodation and adequate income support.



For a Global List of Workers' Demands in the COVID-19 crisis

In the last edition of the Workers Solidarity Bulletin we talked about the global recession that was already in train before the outbreak of COVID-19 exacerbated this crisis. We mentioned that although social distancing and stay-home measures might be essential to curb the spread of a very contagious and, without proper medical care, very lethal virus, the State of Emergency measures adopted by just about every national government across the world could be abused. We said in our previous edition, that the State of Emergency powers were less about stopping the spread of COVID-19, and more about quelling the possibility of any workers' organising in response to government action against our interests.

Quoting from our last edition, we noted that 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."

Since the release of our last edition, governments globally are taking similar actions to those of the 2008 crisis, in that they continue to

prop up business with ever greater bailouts, and are only offering cursory concessions to the working class.

In Australia, the Morrison government's first two bailout packages were mainly to the banks. The first bailout package was for \$17.6 billion and the second was for \$105 billion. Much of these packages went to the banks for reduced interest rates and for cheap loans in order to keep the economy going. There was a third package, but the fourth, for \$130 billion, is when we finally saw some relief for workers in the JobSeeker and JobKeeper payments. However, the JobKeeper payments go directly to business, and then onto workers, rather than directly to workers, leaving the scheme open to exploitation. Furthermore, the JobKeeper payment excludes over 1 million casuals and neither payment is available to temporary migrant workers (see our article about migrant workers on the opposite page). Even the proposal for free childcare, though a central demand of the women's movement here in Australia and right across the world, was not offered to relieve working women of workplace sexism. Childcare should be free - during the pandemic, and afterwards.

This pattern of government bailouts to big business is replicated right across the world. The US released a \$2 trillion coronavirus rescue package for companies to continue paying their workforce - and earn profits - while production grinds to a halt owing to stay-home measures. Japan also announced a \$1 trillion stimulus package and governments right across Europe have introduced an array of business-saving measures that include some payments to workers to try to curb the unemployment crisis.

"This time, governments have much more power to repress workers' organising, making our fight back challenging and dangerous."

It is true that some of this bailout is finding its way into the hands of workers – just enough to keep some of us, but not all of us, alive. Where all of these measures fall short though, is in the genuine and consistent application of health and safety precautions for all workers and for society at large. The World Health Organisation has said that what is needed to halt the spread of COVID-19 is a dramatic increase in testing, isolation of those testing positive, proper social distancing measures and adequate Personal Protective Equipment (PPE).

School teachers and childcare educators have consistently complained that hygiene standards are low, increasing the risk of transmission. Yet no funding has been offered to support teachers to maintain clean and hygienic school and childcare environments, even though this industry has been declared essential. Nurses and other medical professionals have complained about a shortage in PPE. And yet we have not been able to adequately redirect industry to manufacture PPE to curb the pandemic. And when 60 workers at DP World took part in cease work action under the OHS Act and refused to unload a ship due to COVID-19 concerns (see our Disputes section in this edition), they were stood down.

What's different about these bailouts compared to those in 2008? This time, governments have much more power to repress workers' organising, making our fight back challenging and dangerous.

In Melbourne, Victoria, pro-refugee activists participated in a car convoy to a suburban hotel where refugees have been held prisoner, supposedly for COVID-19 measures. The protest highlighted the hypocrisy of the reasons these refugees are being held, compared with the conditions they are being held in. Lead organiser, Chris Breen, was arrested in his home, well before the commencement of the protest, and is currently facing charges of incitement – a charge that predates COVID-19. Up to 26 protesters have also been fined \$1650 in violation of social distancing laws. This is all the while that they were in cars, did not exit



their cars, and maintained social distancing within those cars – in other words, only travelled with people of the same household. The over-policing and abuse of Emergency Powers to supposedly ensure our health and safety is not only occurring in Australia. Like the government bailouts of big business, over-policing is being replicated all over the world.

During the political turmoil in Hong Kong last year, the Hong Kong authority introduced anti-mask laws for protests and mass gatherings. There have been a number of constitutional challenges to this law but the final decision was handed down on Thursday 9 April 2020. The anti-mask laws remain. In fact, the Hong Kong Court of Appeal ruled that while “the government had the right to ban the wearing of masks at unlawful assemblies, a ban on masks at legal public gatherings was unconstitutional.” So you can wear face masks at gatherings, but not protests. Face masks are PPE.

In India, the right wing nationalist government of Narendra Modi introduced a citizenship law that in effect, withdrew citizenship for Muslims in that country. Massive protests involving millions of people have taken place in India since December 2019 in opposition to these laws, led by a group of women known as the Shaheen Bagh protesters. Following the outbreak of COVID-19 in India, protesters were provided with face masks and hand sanitiser by supporters, but on March 24, the protest was violently broken up by police, under the COVID-19 emergency measures. There were mass arrests where no social distancing nor sanitation or hygiene measures were able to be observed. Furthermore, India is ranked 6th in the world for homelessness – no government decrees have been enacted to keep the homeless population of India safe from the COVID-19 pandemic.

And in Algeria where a protest movement reached a 12 month milestone in February 2020, workers seemed unstoppable in opposing the then leader of that country, President Abdelaziz Bouteflika's attempt to run for a fifth term. Two months into the protests, President Bouteflika resigned, but the protests persisted. The main focus was on opposing government corruption, mismanagement of the economy, and generalised crackdowns on civil liberties. Following the COVID-19 outbreak, Algeria's current President, Abdelmadjid Tebboune declared a ban on protests – cynically in an effort to quell the revolution.

The State of Emergency powers are decidedly not being used to maintain public health. They are being used to repress public uprisings. Public uprisings are a natural consequence of economic desperation – a situation that has been in the works since the 2008 economic crisis, the result of which is a recession that was catalysed by COVID-19, but not created by it.

One thing we know about COVID-19, is that its impact both medically and economically, is global. Workers are fighting for the same things every

where – and we are stronger together. On April 7 this year, 32 unionists and working class representatives from 11 different countries got together on a call. We started discussing the possibility of developing a Global List of Workers' Demands in the COVID-19 Crisis. The list below, is that proposed list. It's not set in stone, and Workers' Solidarity is interested in your views and opinions about them. If workers across the world don't agree with these demands, there's no point in having them.

This same group of unionists and working class representatives is getting together again soon, and we will vote on these demands. Your opinions, dissent, agreement, amendments and counter proposals will be very welcome, and they will be discussed.

Please write us with your feedback at:

we.are.workers.solidarity@gmail.com

Workers' Demands in the COVID-19 Crisis



- 1 No job losses.** No sackings for any reason. All redundancies and layoffs to be made illegal.
- 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 All people to be provided a guaranteed liveable income,** through preservation of employment, wage subsidies, direct payments, existing social security systems or other means without any queues or bureaucratic hurdles, to achieve a universal living wage income payment.
- 4 State provision of food to the most vulnerable,** particularly in informal settlements, slums, rural villages and isolated communities.
- 5 No evictions for any reasons from any accommodation.** No utility disconnections for any reason. Provide immediate emergency accommodation to homeless people using spare hospitality industry accommodation.
- 6 Free access to health care for all.** Support and refinance the health industry, employing as many additional support workers as required, nationalising private health companies without compensation if required.
- 7 Reorganise industry production to achieve a safe environment for all workers still at work.** Increase the production and distribution of necessities, nationalising companies without compensation if required.
- 8 Coordinated international assistance,** particularly in the provision of health care equipment.
- 9 Introduce emergency taxes on all large corporations,** nationalising them without compensation if required.
- 10 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.

WHAT'S ON

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.

UWU Digital Mass Meeting

Wednesday 15th April 15:00

All UWU members are invited to discuss the plan to fight for workers' rights, ask questions, decide and take action. Contact the United Workers Union to register.

Labor Notes 2020 Digital Conference (USA)

Topics include:

- Building Power During the Pandemic
- Organizing a Stewards' Network
- A Just Recovery: From the Climate Crisis to the Pandemic
- Organizing on Health and Safety in the Face of Coronavirus

Sunday, 19 April 2020 at 3am - 8am
(Melbourne time) Register at:
labornotes.org/virtualconference

May 1 Car Convoy: Workers' Rights, Social Justice, Climate Action

May Day Event. Search 'May 1 Movement' on Facebook for details

Friday 1st May, 11:00-14:00

Undocumented Migrants COVID-19 Fundraiser

New organisation and campaign to support undocumented migrants and their families, particularly in light of the COVID-19 crisis

Five demands:

Medicare for all, Information Firewall, Universal Basic Income, No deportation, detention, Amnesty for International Workers.
Fundraiser: www.gf.me/u/xvp83g

Social media:

facebook.com/undocumentedmigrantssolidarity

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

<https://www.megaphone.org.au/petitions/coronavirus-wage-subsidies-now>

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

<http://www.peopleshistory.com.au/>



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