This edition falls between several notable days: the seventh anniversary of the Rana Plaza disaster on April 24, International Workers Memorial Day on April 28 and May Day on the 1st. In this bumper issue we speak to the histories of these days, their ramifications and what each can tell us about what is needed now.

Most of us will not be able to celebrate May Day by taking the streets this year. However, in this time of draconian measures it is vital that we stay safe without backing down. What the future of fighting back will look like is an ongoing conversation being had by unionists around the world.

We want to hear from you. Get in touch with your comments and thoughts at:

we.are.workers.solidarity@gmail.com

ITF/MUA/South Coast Labour Council – Ruby Princess

A coalition of unionists including the ITF, MUA and the South Coast Labour Council have campaigned for crew aboard the Ruby Princess cruise ship. While passengers were able to disembark in Sydney, crew members (including at least 202 with COVID-19) were left stranded at Port Kembla (Wollongong). Unionists campaigned for sick crew to be treated in Australia, healthy crew to be repatriated to their home countries and for the ship to be deep cleaned before being sailed by volunteer crew. 542 crew were eventually disembarked for either medical treatment or repatriation, however 300 remained on board when the Ruby Princess was forced to leave Australian waters on 23 April. This incident highlights the vulnerabilities of seafarers – far from home, sailing under flags of convenience and often at risk of exploitation.

Workers in Australia – Christian Porter

On 16 April, Federal Industrial Relations Minister Christian Porter approved a change to the Fair Work Act regulations that reduces the access period (the requirement for employers to give workers seven days’ notice of any proposed EBA amendments before they are put to a vote by workers) from 7 days to 1 day. Porter claimed that the change was required to give employers “flexibility to rapidly respond to the extreme and urgent workplace challenges caused by the COVID-19 pandemic”, however the changes to workplace agreements do not have to be related to COVID-19 measures. And while the change to the Act will automatically be repealed after 6 months (unless the Minister extends it) any changes to agreements will remain for the life of the agreement. After pushback from unions and workers, Porter has responded saying there will be a review after 2 months, and that he won’t hesitate to reverse the change if it is abused by employers. But with reports of bosses already rorting the JobKeeper program and widespread wage theft scandals, we’re pretty sure it is a case of when this will be abused by employers, not if.
The TWU is also fighting Qantas in the Federal Court over the airline’s refusal to pay sick leave for stood down workers.

RTBU - Metro Trains

After a long dispute, an agreement with Metro Trains has been reached. The agreement includes a 14% pay increase over 4 years with back pay to 1 July 2019. The agreement includes gendered violence and sexual harassment protections, an additional 2 weeks of parental leave. The agreement also assists job security through a commitment to retraining and redeployment, and an increase to part-time overtime payments.

Yarra Trams

The RTBU has also finalised an agreement with Yarra Trams. Workers will receive a 14% pay increase over 4 years. There will also be a 10% cap on part time employment, with improvements to job security for full-time staff and rostering certainty for all part time staff. Similarly to Metro Trains, they have included gendered violence and sexual harassment provisions in the agreement; as well as recognition of women’sadvocates.

Amazon Workers - USA

Workers in Amazon distribution centres around the USA are taking action as the COVID-19 pandemic reaches crisis levels. On 21 April hundreds of workers called in sick to demand food boxes in their community. A coalition of workers, community groups and shopkeepers, food banks and residents are donating food to be distributed to those who need it. McDonalds has opposed the action. A lawyer speaking for the collective said “We would have preferred to do this with an agreement from McDonald’s France, but they said no... They are devoid of the slightest bit of humanity, so the workers just decided to ignore them.” Selling food to make money for a multinational is not essential; using those assets as a community organising hub to feed the hungry is.

McDonalds Takeover - France

Workers at a McDonald’s outlet in Saint-Barthélemy have taken over the restaurant to use as a base to distribute food boxes in their community. The McDonalds is located in the northern suburbs of Marseille which has high unemployment and 39% of people living below the poverty line. A coalition of workers, community groups and unions have taken over the restaurant and shopkeepers, food banks and residents are donating food to be distributed to those who need it. McDonalds has opposed the action. A lawyer speaking for the collective said “We would have preferred to do this with an agreement from McDonald’s France, but they said no... They are devoid of the slightest bit of humanity, so the workers just decided to ignore them.” Selling food to make money for a multinational is not essential; using those assets as a community organising hub to feed the hungry is.

Marcus Harrington

United Workers Union rank and File Member

Previously was a Senior Delegate of the National Union of Workers at the now defunct Woolworths. Hume Distribution Centre in Broadmeadows, Victoria and former Health and Safety Representative, and casual organiser at the NSW

How long have you been a union member?

18 years.

Why did you join the union?

I joined the NUW when I started working at Hume DC, and the members were just about to start their campaign for a new Enterprise Agreement. The union delegates took time to educate me on what unionism was all about, and from that I learnt that there is strength in unity, and when workers stand united we can win.

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

My best memory so far of being active in the union movement?

labour hire industry in Victoria, from the concept back in 2011 right up until the Labour Hire Licensing Act became a reality in 2019. It was a fight, but a winning campaign in the end.

As part of the campaign, I represented the 24,000 NUW members at the Victorian Labour Advisory Council meeting, attended by all the Trades Hall affiliated unions and the Victorian Labor parliamentarians, to put the issue of insecure work front and centre, and this was one of my proudest moments.

Also memorable was being closely involved and a member on the negotiation committee of the successful 2017 One Big Shed Enterprise Agreement Campaign, which resulted in major improvements to redundancy entitlements, which won the John Cummins Award for the Best Victorian Workplace Campaign, and the Hume delegates being awarded the 2017 Eureka Australia Medal for upholding the principles of the Eureka Rebellion.

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

The decline of secure, permanent employment, and the rise of precarious and casualised forms of employment, to the point where 50% of workers in Australia are placed in these insecure forms of work. The casualisation crisis results in precarity social and economic impacts for working people.

Why should people join their union?

Because workers united will never be defeated! Workers united can win the battle for a safer workplace and stronger when we stand united, so we can defend and protect all those conditions that were won by workers of the previous generations, and in order to win better wages and conditions going forward, and to reverse the casualisation crisis. Evidence also suggests that union sites are safer sites.

With the attacks on workers and their unions by the Liberal Government, the Ensuring Integrity Bill and wage theft that is rife, there has never been a more important time for workers to join their Union and become active.

The issue of PPE – or OHS more generally – is not something which has cropped up because the world is in the midst of a pandemic that has infected over 3 million people (as of April 28). Rather, it is an issue that unions have been fighting for years to force employers to take actions to protect the health and safety of their workers. OHS has become more relevant than ever for unions and it was not so many years ago that even in ‘developed’ countries, hundreds of workers were killed in their workplace. Much has been achieved, but workers are still killed and nailed every day.

This week, on April 28, workers around the world marked International Workers Memorial Day. While 39 workers were killed in workplace incidents in Victoria in 2020, the numbers in other countries are frightening – for instance more than 100,000 construction workers die each year in preventable “accidents” on site. This year, the international theme is ‘Stop the pandemic at work’ in light of the millions of workers being exposed and the thousands dying daily. Once again workers and their unions are continuing to vigorously fight for health and safety, even in the midst of, or because of, the pandemic.

What has been in the news a great deal has been the international shortage of personal protective equipment (PPE) for workers in the ‘frontline’.

Demands for protection of health and safety clash with the interests of capital – where they can, bosses will spend as little as possible and if they can get away with it, will not comply with OHS laws and either ‘hope for the best’ or count on not being caught or not being punished if they are. Bosses are willing to sacrifice workers to save and make money. So even in Australia, rather than eliminate the nasty chemical for a safer one, or replace the machines, bosses will give their workers PPE.

Anyone who has worked in OHS, or is an elected health and safety representative (EHSR) will tell you that under normal circumstances PPE (or personal protective equipment) is at the bottom of the hierarchy of risk control. That’s the …
"Where they can, bosses will spend as little as possible and if they can get away with it, will not comply with OHS laws"

But if doctors and nurses are having to go without, other workers in the 'front line' - less prestigious and with far less power - like cleaners, retail workers, delivery and gig economy workers, and others, are worse off and the risk to them has increased too. These are some of the most poorly paid workers with the worst conditions (and a lot of them are women, young workers, and workers on temporary visas).

So if rich countries like Australia, the USA and the UK are suffering from such shortages, what about the rest of the world - third world countries with high levels of poverty?

In Australia, the World Health Organisation’s director-general, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, said the chronic, global shortage of personal protective gear “is one of the most urgent threats to our collective ability to save lives” from the novel coronavirus. WHO is shipping PPE to countries most in need; WHO had by that date shipped 13 million protective gear items to 74 countries, and was preparing to send a similar amount to 60 more countries, "but much more is needed”. But the director-general said the problem could not be fully be solved without "international cooperation and international solidarity.”

Yet WHO itself is currently under threat; Trump last week announced that the US will halt funding to the organisation because it has “failed in its basic duty” in its response to the coronavirus outbreak.

He accused the UN agency of mismanaging and covering up the spread of the virus after it emerged in China, and said it must be held accountable.

So where does this leave countries with much lower GDPs than the US, the UK, Australia and European countries? Where does it leave the workers in those countries? They must hope that their governments are taking as many preventative measures as possible to curb the spread of the infection. Nevertheless, even with all the best efforts, health care workers and others will need to have adequate PPE - otherwise they will remain at increased risk. As WHO’s Tedros said, these workers in low and middle-income countries deserve the same protection as those in wealthier countries.

It is vital that we stand with these workers both here and internationally in solidarity now, but also after the health crisis to ensure they not only have safe work, but decent working conditions.

The vast majority of work related deaths are preventable. The union movement actively campaigns on occupational health and safety, and those efforts are partly reflected by the fact that the greater the degree of unionism in a workplace, the safer it is.

This year IWMD will give us the chance to remember the workers who have died because of COVID-19, and all those who have died because of their work - and renew our pledge to fight for the living. Unions right across the world are taking actions and launching campaigns for International Workers Memorial Day, and you can find more information at: www.28April.org

On April 28 each year, unions, workers and their families and friends, in over 100 countries gather to remember the men, women and children who:

- were killed or injured at work, or because sick from exposure to hazardous substances;
- were tortured, imprisoned, murdered or oppressed because of their trade union activities;
- suffered degradation, pollution or destruction of their communities due to unsustainable work practices.

In Australia

- Every year around 440 workers are killed in traumatic work-related incidents (over 8 each week). Diseases such as cancer and asbestos related illnesses cause about 2,500 additional deaths per year (4 to per week);
- Road accidents in Australia claim about 50 lives each week. Many of these victims are workers travelling to or from work, or are driving in the course of their employment;
- According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, more than 15 serious injuries occur every hour (or 1 injury every 4 minutes).

Worldwide

- There are at least 1.5 million worker deaths per year. This is nearly double the number of deaths due to war;
- 12,000 of those killed are children. Over ‘60 million new injuries and work related diseases are reported each year;
- International unions estimate that each year over 200 trade unionists are killed or “disappeared” 8,500 are arrested, 5,000 injured and almost 20,000 fired for trying to improve basic working conditions.
Seven years ago on April 24 2013, in Dhaka, Bangladesh, one of the worst workplace disasters in the history of the world occurred when the eight storey Rana Plaza building collapsed. In the rubble of the destroyed building, 1,138 workers were killed while another 2,500 were injured.

The Rana Plaza housed some shops and offices but the majority of workers who died and were injured were women employed in the many garment factories located throughout the building. This was a disaster waiting to happen.

The building itself was built on unstable reclaimed swampland and was certified for only light commercial use. In addition, substandard construction material was used and three additional storeys were added illegally. The day before the collapse, the whole building had been evacuated as large cracks had appeared in the walls. On the morning of the 24th, gar-

ment workers were refusing to return to work, but were ordered back by their bosses or face being dismissed with no pay. Once the factories restarted, the diesel generators turned on, the building collapsed, burying thousands of workers. The owners of the building and the bosses are facing multiple charges but none of them have yet faced court over this mass slaughter of workers.

While the scale of this disaster was unprecedented, the unfortunate reality was that the collapse was no isolated accident but the result of a brutal global system that maximises profits and treats workers as costs to be minimised.

The garment sector in Bangladesh is one of the biggest in the world with around 3.5 million workers employed in close to 5,000 factories, generating 80% of the country’s total export revenue.

The industry’s success is based on its extremely low cost base. Workers routinely work 94-96 hours a day, six days a week in unhealthy workplaces, face routine abuse by their managers, and are paid starvation wages. These conditions are maintained by a semi-permanent state of repression where workers face beatings, sackings, arrests and even death for any attempts to organise independent unions. Not only do workers face the state forces of the police and military, but companies can also call on organised thugs to attack workers.

Nevertheless, garment workers have continually staged ongoing industrial actions and strikes, sometimes millions strong, to try and improve their conditions and wages. In late 2018, after years of struggle, the Bangladesh government raised the monthly minimum wage for garment workers for the first time in five years – to Tk 8,000 (USD 96). This was less than what the workers were demanding, in addition to the fact that thousands of workers do not even receive this minimum wage as employers face few, if any, penalties for not following this regulation. In January 2019 mass demonstrations by garment workers were brutally repressed with tens of thousands losing their jobs after taking part in these protests.

Even though the wages in Bangladesh are so low, garment workers are continually told that they can’t ask for more wages, work less hours, ask for better health and safety as otherwise the companies will go somewhere else. The garment industry is a global industry with supply chains around the world in a constant ‘Race to the Bottom’. Currently, the new frontier for the garment industry is being established in Ethiopia where the minimum wage is around US $26 a month.

The fight in Bangladesh is the same as that in Australia. It is about the right to organise, the right to health and safety, and for a living wage. It is just such mere brutality.

May 1 is International Workers Day, better known as May Day. It is when workers across the world march for our rights, united in one struggle for dignity.

May Day’s origins are in the movement for the 8-hour work day, where workers in Australia played an integral role. Striking builders in Sydney were among the first workers in the world to agitate for and achieve an 8-hour work day with no loss of pay, in 1855. They were followed by stonemasons in Victoria, who marched from Melbourne University to Parliament on 21 April 1856, and held a celebratory procession on 12 May that year. The Eight Hour Day March became an annual event held on 1 May until 1951, and was declared a public holiday in Victoria in 1879. The stonemasons’ success inspired a nationwide movement to consolidate the 8-hour work day as the standard for all workers.

This movement bolstered international efforts towards the same aim. In 1884, unions in the United States declared that the 8-hour work day would become the norm as of 1 May, 1886. That day, hundreds of thousands of workers in the US took part in a general strike. On 4 May, at a peaceful rally at Haymarket Square in Chicago, a bomb was thrown, killing seven police and four civilians. In lieu of a lead suspect, police rounded up eight prominent anarchists, who were then convicted of conspiracy. Of the eight, four were hanged on 10 October 1887: George Engel, Adolph Fischer, Albert Parsons and August Spies.

In remembrance of those wrongly accused and executed in the Haymarket Affair, May Day was established as an annual international event in 1890; the following year, in Queensland, over 900 striking union shearsers and their supporters marched through the streets of Barcaldine. Ten years later, 1500 people gathered on the Yarra Bank to pay tribute to May Day.

From its origins in the 8-hour work day movement, May Day has grown to symbolise the ongoing necessity for radical direct action around workers’ rights, and the global nature of these struggles. That this radicalism is alive and threatens ruling class interests is evident in the fact that May Day is still violently repressed around the world. In Turkey, the Gezi Park Uprising of 2013 was spurred on, in part, by a May Day march to Taksim Square that was prevented by police wielding tear gas and water cannons. In 2019, police attacked a May Day protest in Iran ten minutes after it had commenced, arresting thirty-five participants and detaining four of them for over two months.

For decades, workers have put their lives at risk to fight on May Day and this year is no different. Workers across the world will still be fighting – in whatever way they can, given the almost universal states of emergency because of COVID-19. Here in Australia, it’s simply not enough to celebrate the gains made locally, nor is tokenistic solidarity with comrades overseas. The achievements we take for granted in Australia are always under threat – particularly during this state of emergency, which threatens the 8-hour work day, our ability to organise planned events, to even organise at all.

It may be difficult, in the current circumstances, to co-ordinate our efforts on 1 May, let alone on any single day, but fighting is still possible, and is very necessary. If you don’t fight, you lose.

For further reading we recommend ‘A Short History of May Day’ which can be found online at libcom.org/history/1886-haymarket-martyrs-maydayvv

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

Forum: Workers fightback: No worker left behind (Online, via Zoom)
Speakers: Tim Kennedy (UWU); David Ball (MUA); Helen Masterman-Smith (NTEU)
18:30 Wednesday April 29
https://us02web.zoom.us/j/82213204953

May 1 Car Convoy Sydney: Workers’ Rights, Social Justice, Climate Action
May Day Event. Search ‘May 1 Movement’ on Facebook for details
11:00-14:00 Friday 1st May

May Day: Exercise Your Rights (Melbourne)
May 1st, 17:30
Search Facebook for details.

Organised by Haymarket Books and Labor Notes
2nd May 7:00am (Melbourne time)
Search for event on ‘Eventbrite’ to RSVP

Campaign: Defend the Right to Protest: Free The Refugees
Refugee Action Collective
Sign-on statement, petition, fundraiser and public meeting (see below).
https://rac-vic.org/defend-the-right-to-protest-free-the-refugees/

Emissions Reduction Targets Response: Party or Protest?
Actions TBC dependant on the detail of the Victorian Govt’s soon-to-be-released Emissions Reduction plan.
9am - 18:00 Tuesday 5th May
actionclimate.org.au/partyorprotestevent

Forum: Refugee Racism is a Health Risk: Defend the Right to Protest (Online via Zoom)
Refugee Action Collective
18:30 Monday 4 May

Campaign: Undocumented Migrant Solidarity
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/undocumented-migrantssolidarity

School Strike for Climate (Online)
Friday 15th May
Various activities, all online.
schoolstrike4climate.com/may15

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

Workers Solidarity General Meeting (Online via Zoom)
Third Thursday of every month
18:00 Thursday 21st May

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