With the government discussing the easing of restrictions it’s important to note that until a vaccine exists the chance for another wave of infection remains high. The re-opening of the economy is inevitable and we all want to be able to move freely again but we cannot embrace a return to normality if it puts workers in danger. Will adequate measures be taken to ensure the health and safety of those going back out on the job? Certainly not if its left up to the bosses.

Questions? Comments? Send them to: we.are.workers.solidarity@gmail.com

May Day

Despite the pandemic, the May 1 Movement in NSW successfully organised a car convoy in Sydney on May 1st attended by hundreds of unionists. A smaller “Exercise your rights” demonstration took place at the 8 Hour Monument in Melbourne before being broken up by police. The MUA also organised a convoy action in Fremantle. Around the world, workers marked May Day, some alone in their homes, others in their workplaces. Some held demonstrations with masks and social distancing such as the Greek Labour Union (PAME) in Athens and Korean Confederation of Trade Union affiliates in Seoul. In Turkey, several demonstrators were arrested as they marched to Taksim Square in defiance of the government lockdown. Health care workers in Soweto, South Africa protested outside health clinics demanding PPE. In Cuba, workers sang from their balconies. Many noted that 2020 was a May Day like no other. Let’s hope we can take to the streets in 2021.

IEU - Islamic School of Canberra

Teachers and staff at the Islamic School of Canberra took a 1 hour stop work action on Thursday 30 April. Workers have been in negotiations with the school since 2016, and receive around $10,000 per annum less than other teachers in the ACT and NSW. The school has applied to terminate the current agreement, and the new agreement proposed by the school reduces paid parental leave from 14 weeks to 2 weeks; reduces redundancy entitlements and long service leave entitlements to the legal minimum, and increases the notice period teachers must give to resign.

RAFFWU - SDA - Fast Food Workers

The Fair Work Commission has rejected proposed changes to the Fast Food Industry Award despite agreement between the AIG, employers such as McDonalds, the ACTU and the SDA. Employers wanted to waive overtime and set shifts for...
part time workers. RAFPWU opposed the award changes. The Commission refused the changes due to a lack of evidence that major fast food outlets such as McDonalds had been substantially affected by the pandemic.

JobKeeper
While 775,000 businesses and 4.7 million workers have registered for JobKeeper at the time of writing, there are a number of issues with the programme. The Fair Work Commission has received at least 120 applications regarding JobKeeper disputes, and 400 workers have reported issues at their workplaces to the Victorian Trades Hall Council JobKeeper website, including workers at Cotton On who were being denied the payment as they did not meet the criteria of working on a “regular and systematic basis” because they took an extended break from work despite having worked for the business for years. Many workers including international students, migrant workers, and workers at universities and city councils are unable to access JobKeeper at all. No worker should be left behind during this pandemic.

Meat workers - USA
At the end of April at least 6,000 meat workers in the USA had contracted COVID-19 at 80 different facilities in 26 states resulting in several temporary plant closures. Strikes and mass sickouts have also erupted at meatworks around the USA with workers concerned about their health and safety. Donald Trump reacted by signing an Executive Order using the Defense Production Act to force processing plants to stay open as meat shortages started to become apparent. The President of the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union commented “We only wish that this administration cared as much about the lives of working people as it does about meat, pork and poultry products.” Australia too has now had an outbreak of COVID-19 at a meatworks with, as of May 12, 85 positive cases connected to a cluster at Cedar Meats in Melbourne.

Democracy & Freedom - Lebanon & Algeria
While the world is focused on COVID-19, the struggles we were fighting before the virus have not vanished. In Algeria, protests started in February 2019 with the biggest public demonstration in 18 years. They are fighting for whole society change including the departure of the ruling elite and the withdrawal of the military from politics. While demonstrations ceased due to the threat of COVID-19, arrests of activists continued; and with Algeria having the second largest number of cases of COVID-19 in Africa, people are also angry about the government’s mishandling of the health crisis. In Lebanon, anti-government protests that began in October have returned after a brief pause at the start of the lockdown. The protests are against corruption and the ongoing economic crisis. Banks have been torched and vandalised in response to the economic crisis, and people have clashed with soldiers and the police in the streets. As a sign of support for demonstrators – people bang pots and pans from their homes. Protestors in Beirut shouted “to the capitalists we say revolution!” The struggle continues.

Piegiorgio (Pier) Moro
Australia Services Union VicTas A&S Workplace delegate and a RHM
How long have you been a union member?
I’ve been a member with the ASU for 28 years. I have had shorter stints with other unions.
Why did you join the union?
It just seemed the obvious thing to do really. Two major reasons.
One is that you soon learn that the conditions you have now, like annual and sick leave, were won by previous workers, so you need to show respect and be part of this history.
Secondly it becomes quickly apparent that against the employers individual workers have limited powers. Its really only by uniting that we are able to correct the power imbalance and stand up for our rights.
What’s your best memory/story about being in the union movement?
While going to big, noisy and colourful protests really make you feel the passion and power of our movement, I think the small moments matter as well.
Years ago, I was the delegate at a very small community organisation negotiating its very first EBA. The process had taken many years (long story) and we had come down to three outstanding items. Management said they would agree to only two of them. We could choose which two. By that time, I was drained by the negotiations and would have been happy to accept the offer.
So, I called a meeting, all 9 of us, and I put to them the offer by management. We discussed it for two hours and at the end, to my pleasant surprise, we voted to reject the offer and stick to our claims for all 3 items. The vote was unanimous.
The next day, management relented and agreed to accept our last 3 claims. It really high-lighted to me the power of the collective and the value of trusting my fellow workers.

What’s the most important issue facing the union movement today?
Obviously the growing insecurity and casualisation of our jobs. This then leads to less pay and worse conditions.

Why should people join their union?
Simple. Look at countries where the unions have been defeated or are extremely weak. Those are the wages and conditions we will face if we don’t organise.

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

Workers Solidarity

Community organisation negotiating its very first EBA
For 28 years having been a member with the ASU
Workers Solidarity

Backbone of Our Movement

Oh No, I am a casual, now working from home. Does the company I am working for have to provide me with an ergonomic office chair?

Oh No, Mates!

Unfortunately, there is nothing specifically in the law that requires an employer to provide the equipment necessary for someone to work from home. However, under Victoria’s OHS Act (and similar acts in other jurisdictions), the employer DOES have a legal duty to employees (including casual employees) to, so far as is reasonably practicable, provide and maintain a working environment that is safe and without risks to health. This is called the ‘general duty of care’ and applies to everything: the workplace, the equipment, the systems of work, supervision and training, and so on. But it is qualified by ‘so far as is reasonably practicable’.

Australia’s OHS regulators are all providing guidance and advice, but Comcare has made the clearest statement: “An employer has the same work health and safety obligations to a worker.
The workplace is unionised and has strong HSRs.

It will also depend on whether employees and HSRs on matters relating to OSH and any issues associated with working from home.

So, what are the things that an employer should be doing? At the very least:

- Consulting with you, and any HSRs, on any issues relating to working from home
- Ensuring an audit of your working space and equipment is done to check the physical working environment
- Set clear work tasks and expectations, create an appropriate digital workplace, support work-life balance.
- Also take measures to look after your psychosocial health: establishing a way to maintain communication, set clear work tasks and expectations, create an appropriate digital workplace, support work-life balance.

When it comes to the equipment that you must use - not just your chair, but computer, monitor, and so on - the union position is that your employer should be responsible for this. Either it should be provided by the employer OR the employer should cover the cost of any extra equipment which must be purchased. Once again, Concave has the clearest advice: “Where possible, this cost should be included in the digital workplace, support work-life balance.”

May 8th marked the 50 year anniversary of the first of the Australian Moratorium marches against the the Vietnam War. On that day in 1970 over 100,000 workers, mothers and students marched across Australia in the largest public demonstration in the country’s history.

The power of the Moratorium came from the broader involvement of a diverse working class movement and a national strike campaign organised by unions. Workers walked off their jobs en masse with unionists mobilising under the slogan “Stop Work to Stop the War”.

By 1971 Australian public opinion had turned decisively against the war and Australian involvement in the Vietnam war.

The world is still reeling from the shock and speed of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the social and economic ruin it has brought. Whilst the impact of the pandemic has been uneven, the best outcomes in terms of saving lives have been achieved where governments have been proactive in developing communities achieving effective physical distancing to stop the spread of the virus, enabling businesses to make profits.

In all countries, the virus has caused considerable economic disruption, and businesses and governments have begun to push to reopen economies and to shift the crisis onto working people. While this push will not necessarily be successful, to effectively resist this move, it is important that we understand the current crisis and the attacks which are likely to be launched against workers.

The international responses to the crisis vary: within advanced capitalist countries have varied considerably. From the decision by the Danish social democratic minority government to shut down most of their economy and provide a 75% wage subsidy to workers affected, to those countries like the UK and Indonesia, that have sought to continue on as normal in the hopes of achieving “herd immunity”.

The Australian government’s initial response was very much towards the latter approach, but in the face of the crisis it has been forced to shift more towards a shutdown. While the government’s response to the crisis has been framed as supporting working people, as the details of the packages have been revealed, it is clear that the overwhelming focus is on protecting the profits of business at the expense of wages and rights of working people.

It is unclear what the full impact of the current economic crisis will be. In Australia, during the first two weeks of the shutdown some 780,000 workers lost their jobs with estimates of there now being an additional 1.8 - 2.3 million unemployed workers. This number does not include the massive rise in underemployment that has accompanied the crisis. Early estimates of the impact of shutting down the Australian economy were that there would be a contraction in GDP of 2% per month with a projected 2% contraction in GDP over the course of the crisis – however because of how sharp the downturn has been, this is likely to be a significant underestimation.

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For more information, go to OHsreps.org.au (search for ‘Working from home’ and ‘Coronavirus’)

Business obviously believes that the best way to boost profits is to attack the wages and conditions received by workers and this attack is likely to deepen the current economic crisis, not alleviate it.
Finally, efforts to use the mass current spending in response to the crisis as a justification for reducing government spending on public services later on, in order to enable “us” to “pay for the crisis”. This is likely to be seen in the following ways:

- Renewed attacks on the public healthcare system;
- Further cuts and restructuring of universities, making higher education even less accessible to working class people. The current crisis in higher education, whilst triggered by the fall in international student numbers, is the consequence of 25 years of underfunding by successive governments, which universities responded to by increasing the number of international full-fee paying students enrolled;
- Attacks on welfare payments. In the first instance this will be a cut in the additional supplementary payment which is scheduled to be removed in six months, but further down the track will possibly see efforts to wind back and reduce both access to and the amount of welfare payments in general;

In an address on April 21, the Reserve Bank of Australia Governor, Philip Lowe, called for “a strong focus on making Australia a great place for businesses to expand, invest, innovate and hire people is the best way of extending the recovery into a new period of strong and sustainable growth and rising living standards for all Australians”.

Exactly what Lowe means by this can be seen in the April 22 call by the Australian Industry Group for three major changes to workplace laws: Award simplification (i.e. stripping of conditions from Awards - which will also weaken Enterprise Agreements); reduction in the complexity in the Agreement making system which is likely to mean a stripping back of protections within the Fair Work Act which set minimum conditions for Agreements (and make it easier for employers to avoid negotiating with unions); and the amending of the Fair Work Act to define casual employment in such a way as to strip away the right to annual leave for some casuals, provided for in the recent Federal Court decision of Workpac v Skene.

Business obviously believes that the best way to boost profits is to attack the wages and conditions received by workers and this attack is likely to deepen the current economic crisis, not alleviate it. For businesses to make profits they must sell their goods and services. The majority of these are bought by working people and their families. Attackings wages and conditions, particularly across the whole economy, will massively reduce the ability of workers to buy goods, exacerbating the crisis in company profits which had been unfolding prior to the start of the pandemic.

For all of our survival, it will be necessary to restart production and the sale and purchase of those goods produced. While the economy will have to fully reopen eventually, this should be based on ensuring that we have the resources necessary to survive, that workers are being paid enough (which has been undermined by the inadequacies of the JobKeeper payments), and that those workers who do return to work are ensured access to safe working conditions and adequate personal protective equipment for the nature of the work they are performing. What this basically means, is that the economy should be run in the interests of the masses of workers and their families, not in the interests of big business and their profits. And the only way that this would be possible is through workers’ control of the economy.

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WHAT'S ON

In light of the coronavirus and efforts by community members to self isolate, a lot of political meetings and rallies have been either cancelled or postponed for the foreseeable future. A lot of energy has also 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.

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

Young Workers Online Mass Meeting #1
Hosted by the Young Workers Centre
Thursday 14th May, 17:30-19:00
RSVP for Zoom link: weareunion.org.au/mass_meeting_1_work_after_covid

School Strike 4 Climate (Online)
Friday 15th May
Various activities, all online.
schoolstrike4climate.com/may15

‘Pandemic People Power!’
Interactive Online Mini-Conferences
Lasnet Solidarity and Mapuche-Aboriginal Struggles for Indigenous Land (MASIL Project)
Saturday 16th & Sunday 17th May, 11:00 - 14:00
Tickets: latinamericansolidaritynetwork.org

Young Workers Online Mass Meeting #2
Hosted by the Young Workers Centre
Saturday, 16th May, 14:00-15:30
RSVP for Zoom link: weareunion.org.au/mass_meeting_2_work_after_covid_20200516

Latin American Solidarity Network (Lasnet)
Open Meeting 2020
Saturday 16 May 14:00
Either in Edinburgh Gardens, Fitzroy, or online:
Check Facebook event closer to the date.

IDAHOBiT 2020 (International Day Against Homophobia, Biphobia & Transphobia)
Sunday, 17 May
Register your event or sign up to an existing one: idahobit.org.au/

‘Fight Uni Cuts: Students v the Libs’
National Day of Online Action
Including mass class logouts
Friday 22nd May, 13:00-14:00
See Facebook for more information
#nounicuts

‘Why the Refugee Crisis is an International Feminist Issue’ - Online Forum
Wednesday 27th May, 19:00 - 21:00
Hosted by Radical Women - Solidarity Salon
See Facebook for more information & Zoom link

Seed’s ‘Protect Country’ Gala
Seed Indigenous Youth Climate Network
Friday 29th May 18:00-22:00
3 Blackwood St, North Melbourne
More info and tickets: seedmob.org.au/seed_gala_2020

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

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/

Some further things to do at home:

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

Commons Social Change Library
‘We collect, curate and distribute the key lessons and resources of progressive movements around Australia and across the globe’. https://commonslibrary.org/
Topics include: ‘Activist Resources for the Pandemic & Beyond’

People’s History of Australia Podcast
New interview series focussing on radical historical events and movements in Australia.