

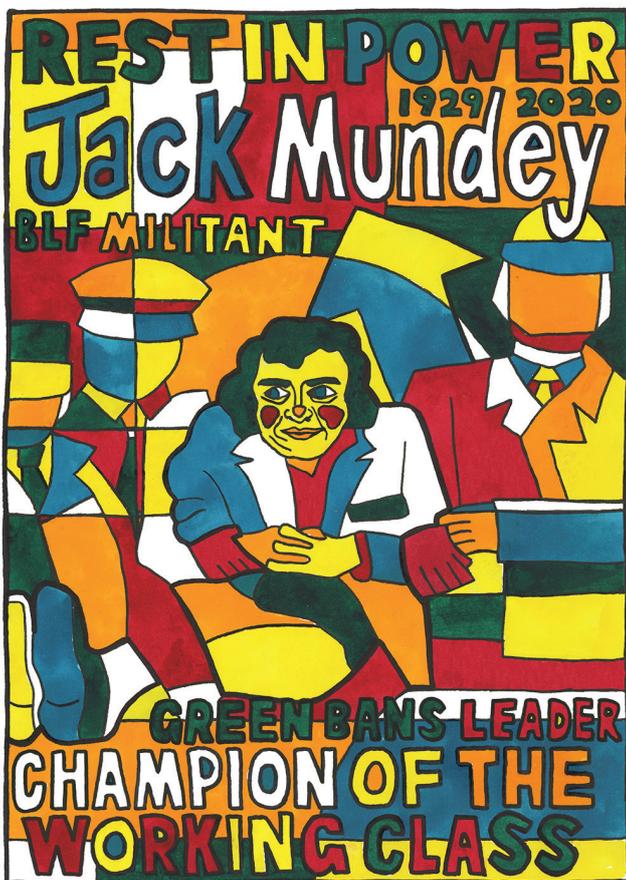
WORKERS SOLIDARITY

BULLETIN · ISSUE 16

Capitalism's ability to both manufacture and profit from disaster is no secret. But capitalists are divided on how to do so in the Covid-19 crisis: whether to open up, shut down, or resort to militant nationalism. Each side in this division represents different threats to workers, which must be counterracted. Each side also represents different opportunities for workers to organise and push for an overhaul of the economy.

Questions? Comments? Send them to:

we.are.workers.solidarity@gmail.com



Nicky Minus

WORKERS IN STRUGGLE

RAFFWU - SDA - Fast Food Workers

The Fair Work Commission has now approved McDonald's application to change the Fast Food Workers Award. More than 200,000 workers covered by the award will face cuts to part time hours and reduced overtime hours. RAFFWU described it as a "chocolate covered shit-sandwich" with some small concessions made by the Commission including blocking partial close downs of stores, and the change in the award to only last until July 31, instead of for 3 months proposed by the SDA & AIG. RAFFWU has been active in opposing the change, including a car convoy action rallying at McDonald's Australian headquarters in Sydney on May 15.

ANMF - SA Nurses

The ANMF have reached an in principle agreement with the SA state government for a new EBA which protects existing conditions, and secures a 2% yearly pay rise, including back pay from January 1 2020. The Government had initially demanded a reduction in night shift; a removal of a "no forced redundancies" provision; and opposed back-pay. Nurses have also been successful in their campaign for the implementation of violence and fatigue policies throughout SA Health.

RTBU - Sydney Bus Drivers

The RTBU representing bus drivers in Sydney has said "nothing is off the table when it comes to safety" when asked about the possibility of industrial action. Drivers are demanding the government supply them with masks, and provide clearer information to the general public around social distancing on public transport.

NSW Public Service

In NSW, the state government is pushing for a public sector wage freeze. Initially it appeared that the wage freeze would not include nurses, but this is now not certain. Nurses in NSW are meant to get a 2.5% wage increase on July 1, meanwhile teachers are expecting a 2.28% rise in January. The Teachers Federation said it was prepared to take "whatever action is necessary"

to force the government to stick to the agreement; while the NSWMA said the decision would be with branches but “we can’t really rule anything out.” The PSA criticised the inequity of senior public servants including the NSW Police Commissioner receiving pay rises while rank and file workers face cuts.

TWU/AMWU/AWU/CEPU - Qantas

The Federal Court has upheld Qantas’ decision to not allow stood down workers to access paid sick leave. Qantas has stood down about 25,000 staff due to COVID-19 travel restrictions, and a coalition of unions argued that these workers should be able to continue to access paid sick, compassionate and carers’ leave. The Federal Court has agreed with Qantas’ arguments that as workers are not at work, they do not need to access these types of leave to absent themselves from work. Workers who are stood down and accessing JobKeeper, including those at Qantas, can however be asked to take annual leave - a directive they cannot unreasonably refuse.

NTEU - Higher Education crisis

The NTEU called a National Day of Action in response to the crisis in higher education and the Federal Government’s poor response. University workers and NTEU members around the country participated in actions including a car and bike convoy with the May 1 Movement in Sydney, demonstrations at the offices of Dan Tehan and Josh Frydenburg as well as Liberal Party HQ. There were also online and campus based activities and meetings.

Belgium - Brussels Tram & Bus Drivers

Drivers on the bus and tram network in Brussels took wildcat industrial action for a week from 11 May coinciding with Belgium loosening its lockdown restrictions. Drivers walked off the job to pressure the public transport company to implement stricter hygiene and social distancing measures. At the height of the action up to 70% of drivers had stopped work and joined the protests. Workers returned to work on 18 May after concessions by bus operators. The network of around 9,300 workers has had a dozen confirmed cases of COVID-19.



Cambodia - Free Soy Sros

Unions are campaigning for the release of Soy Sros, a union activist who was arrested on 2 April after posting about company dismissals on Facebook. Soy Sros, a local union president of Collective Union of Movement and shop steward at a Superl Holdings Ltd factory posted online that the company had “terminated employment contracts of factory workers including a pregnant worker on the ground of lack of raw material due to COVID-19” and was subsequently arrested. She remains in Kompong Speu provincial prison. Unions are demanding the company withdraw the police report, and allow the immediate release of Soy Sros. You can add your name to the international campaign here: <https://www.labourstart.org/go/soy>

BACKBONE OF OUR MOVEMENT



Can Yalcinkaya, NTEU
Rank and file member

How long have you been a union member?

7 years.

Why did you join the union?

I was a long-time casual tutor and I wanted to find out about the NTEU’s plans to address the increasing casualisation in higher education. I also wanted to be part of a movement that is based on solidarity and improving the conditions of workers.

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

In 2014, we went on a one-day strike during the academic EBA negotiations. The strike coincided with a day I had a few tutorials and meant that I would lose a considerable amount of my income for that fortnight. However, the Union provided strike payment from the Defence Fund to casual members who sacrificed their pay to join the strike. I wouldn’t have otherwise been able to pay my rent during that time, so I appreciated the support provided by my union, while standing for something I believed in.

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

The current pandemic has made things worse for workers, particularly in higher education due to not meeting eligibility criteria for jobkeeper and jobseeker payments. It has also exacerbated the already problematic issue of job security. It is more important than ever to join the union movement to show our solidarity with our fellow workers.

Why should people join their union?

There is strength in numbers. The more of us band together, the more say we have in our future.

My employer has started to make noises about us gradually returning to work. What are some of the issues we need to be aware of?

OHS MATTERS

Firstly, it’s crucial you have one or more health and safety representatives (HSRs) as it’s becoming increasingly clear that there are going to be a range of issues which need to be considered and dealt with before workers can safely return to work. Under the obligations of the OHS Act, the employer has a legal duty to consult with any HSRs when identifying and assessing hazards and risks, and when implementing controls to eliminate (or minimise) these hazards and risks. If there are no elected HSRs, then the employer must consult with affected workers - but this is difficult to do effectively, and is often just not done at all. The duty to consult, which is in s35 of the Act, also requires the employer to consult when proposing changes to (almost) anything, like the workplace, the systems of work, the plant and so on. This is super important - how things will need to be done, what the workplace might look like, and more will need to change. Specifically, this might mean changes to or consideration of:

- The physical layout of the workplace to ensure physical distancing
- The hours of work
- How and how often the workplace needs to be cleaned
- Evacuation procedures
- How many visitors/clients can enter the workplace
- Interaction between staff and visitors/clients
- Leave policies
- and more..

These issues will affect the level of risk to workers of contracting COVID-19.

Not all issues are obvious - for example, we have provided feedback to the national WHS

body Safe Work Australia on guidance associated with heating, ventilation and air conditioning (HVAC) systems. In many workplaces, these would have been shut down while COVID-19 restrictions were in place, and will now need to be re-started as workers return. It seems that restarting HVAC systems that have been temporarily shut down can carry significant risks to the health and safety of workers and others entering the building, if the systems have not been maintained and inspected in accordance with relevant regulations and standards prior to restarting.

During periods of shutdown, cooling towers and condenser water systems in an HVAC system can build-up corrosion on the surfaces that have not been chemically treated. When an HVAC system is shut down, sections of the system where water cannot flow through (dead legs) can hold stagnant water. The bacterium Legionella can grow in the corrosion build-up and dead legs, and can cause Legionnaires' disease, a serious infection in the lungs. Employers, and those with management or control of workplaces, have duties under the OHS/WHS Acts: they must take all reasonably practicable steps ensure risks to health and safety are eliminated or minimised. This includes any risks associated with the HVAC system being restarted. Specific advice is being finalised by Safe

Work Australia and will be available on their website (www.safeworkaustralia.gov.au).

There will be other issues, depending on the workplace and the type of work. For example: workers in the transport sector – how many passengers will be allowed in buses or trams; or construction workers – there have already been employer complaints about the difficulties of maintaining physical distancing. For these reasons it is crucial that workers, through their HSRs have a say. It is unacceptable for employers to not consult – using the excuse that there has not been time. It is absolutely 'practicable' to ensure that HSRs are involved in the return to work process.



Stand up fight back!

May 30, 1996 was a day of action. The Howard Government had taken power just 2 months earlier, tabled the draconian Workplace Relations Bill and proposed harsh cuts to the public service and higher education. Workers were furious. The NTEU called a national strike for May 30, and with support from the National Union of Students around 30,000 workers and students mobile around the country to pickets, parliaments, government and ministers' offices. On the same day 150,000 construction workers went on strike. These were some of the first actions that paved the way for the notorious August 1996 "Cavalcade to Canberra".

Public Education Day - 28 May

May 28 is Public Education Day, a time to thank workers in the public education system, and reflect on the importance of public, accessible, lifelong, free education for all. Public Education Day has extra significance this year as schools resume face-to-face classes around the country; public universities face the COVID-19 crisis without JobKeeper support for workers; public TAFEs continue to resist privatisation; and our public preschools continue their work at the frontlines of the pandemic. There has never been a more urgent need to support workers in public education, and the institutions they build.

The Capitalists are not United

ANALYSIS

It is now the end of May and so far, COVID-19 has been cited as the cause of death for about 350,000 people worldwide and has infected about 5.5 million people. The global response to the pandemic has been variable, but most countries have introduced some form of shut down measures, which include social distancing and business closures. The economic fallout has been severe. Many businesses will be wiped out, and some industries will take years to recover.

With business closures comes unemployment, and many countries are reporting figures comparable, if not more severe, than the Great Depression of the 1930s.

Workers worldwide are fighting on three basic sets of demands: health and safety at work where they are still working; no losses to wages and conditions where industries are impacted but not devastated; and liveable welfare subsidies for the masses of unemployed. Our fight is with both the bosses, that is, the capitalists, and with the Governments, who act as the agents of the capitalists.

What is slowly becoming clear is that not all the capitalists are united in their strategy of how to both respond to the global pandemic, and how to recover the global economy. Some capitalists are suffering more than others. It seems that even for them, we are not all in this together.

There are two clear sides amongst the capitalists. Those that want to reopen the economy regardless of the speed and spread of COVID-19, and those that want to shut everything down until COVID-19 is all but gone. For ease of writing, we will call these two positions, the Open it Up faction, and the Shut it Down faction. The term faction is not intended to denote a clear, cohesive program amongst a group of capitalists that have sat down and had a chat about their position.

The sectors behind the Shut it Down faction are the monopolies that are benefitting and expanding from the lockdown, increasing exploitation and decreasing overhead costs, while killing

off their competitors. They are the retail and supermarket giants, the logistics, distribution and delivery companies, the super flexible gig economy companies, the giant IT and communication companies, the privatised health and medical research industry, the service sectors that can shift jobs to online call centres and work-from-home networks.

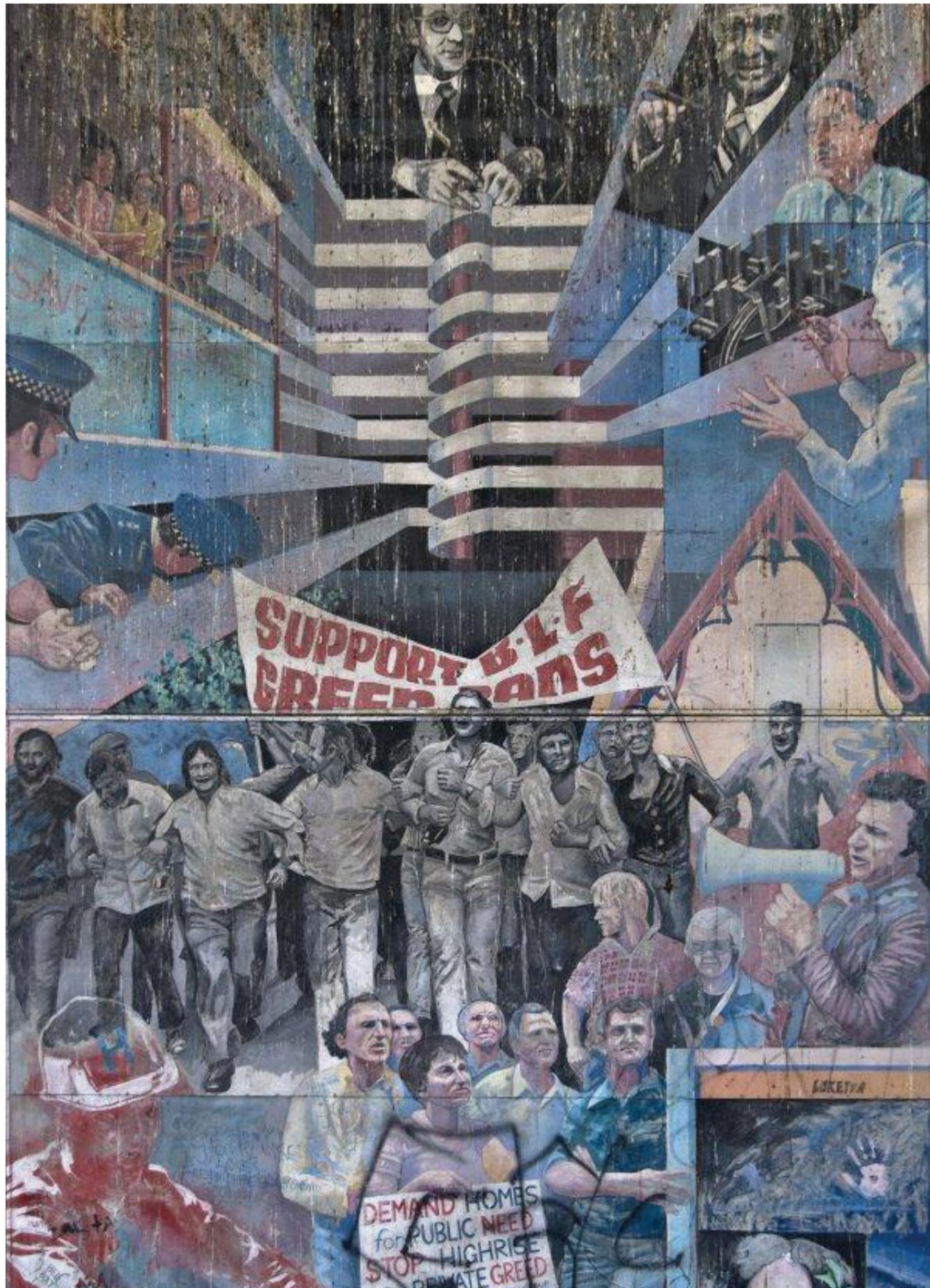
The Shut it Down faction has natural allies in the labour movement, and also in the frontline health workers, the white collar workers in universities, schools, hospitals, health centres and all sorts of scientific occupations.

However such alliances will not protect the workers. The Shut it Down faction is not trying to save the lives of workers, it is trying to take over industries. Acquiring the private time and the home locations of work-from-home employees does open some new markets, but it is a marginal development.

Ultimately, the Shut it Down faction will be overtaken by real life world events within a capitalist economy – because capitalism cannot sustain a shutdown for the period of time required to eradicate the virus. In other words, the Shut it Down faction has no plan for dealing with the economic crisis. There is no program of economic restructuring, they are not intending to increase resources for the health sector, and they have no plan to deal with the oil industry or the airline industry.

Meanwhile the Open it Up capitalist faction is preparing to sacrifice millions of workers in its first period of global rule. It has a very short term economic program. It plans to simply re-open businesses and take the infections, deaths, health system crisis and partial social collapse as necessary collateral damage. But of course that strategy has inherent difficulties. Allowing the virus to spread will break the supply chains, so the economy might actually slow down. And out of control infections will make managing companies very difficult. It may also encourage strikes. Open it Up, like Shut it Down, simply

**The capitalists are not
looking to negotiate
with workers; they are
scrambling for marginal
advantage through any
means necessary.**



Michiel Dolk and Marilyn Fairskye, mural commemorating the BLF led Green Bans, Woolloomooloo

allows for a massive increase of monopoly control over the economy as millions of little businesses and hundreds of big businesses inevitably get destroyed or acquired by the companies that are able to shift capital fast enough and efficiently enough.

However the winning sectors under Open it Up are different from those benefitting from the policies of Shut it Down. Open it Up is supported by companies that can't easily make production safer without massive unprofitable investment or without a slowdown in production. They are the factories with assembly lines, their component suppliers, the agribusinesses, the construction companies, the service sectors that require face to face contact or actual physical contact. Open it Up is also supported by many small businesses that can't restructure as their assets base is too small, like restaurants and small shops.

Open it Up also creates the conditions for a hard brutal hit against the organised working class, using the time-tested weapon of mass unemployment. But the inescapable problem for capitalism is that the workers are also the consumers. And if workers are impoverished through declining health, wage reductions and unemployment, consumers will be affected just as quickly, and businesses will experience a reduction in profits.

There is another faction. The one that pushes for War. This faction has gained significant media support recently. There are now four fronts on which the War faction is gaining support: War with China, Coup in Venezuela, War with Iran, and a new escalation in the conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa.

War is the capitalist faction with the clearest program for opening new markets and also has a clear method of maintaining social control. War is strengthened by the capitalist sectors that have been extremely damaged by the shutdown, but still have an enormous assets base and therefore political influence. They are not supporting War because they are more bloodthirsty than other capitalists, but because their interests are not supported by the other factions and their policies. The oil and gas industries, electricity, mining, aircraft manufacturing, air transport, shipping, and heavy industries would all be rescued by War. But many of the sectors currently supporting Shut it Down and Open it Up could also easily transfer their support to War, as war production would open up huge markets for IT and communication, and for manufacturing of all types, for logistics and distribution and for retail and the service sector too. War is therefore the capitalist faction that has the widest base of potential capitalist support from all the different sectors of the economy.

War is not inevitable, but it is also not unthinkable. And historically, it has been an effective way to resolve an economic crisis of this magnitude.

The capitalists are not looking to negotiate with workers; they are scrambling for marginal advantage through any means necessary. The workers are looking for defensive positions, and the only viable ones turn out to be independent mass workers positions.

Workers need to deal with rule by the different capitalist factions by advancing different demands to influence and neutralise the base of each capitalist faction. Where Shut it Down rules, the demand must be for social support for the workers whose companies are in lockdown, and the expansion of socially useful programs through restructuring industry. Where Open it Up is ruling, the demands need to be centred on restructuring the economy to make jobs safe, opening occupational health & safety as the main area for struggle globally, with multiple connections between workers and organisations.

If the War faction takes over, the situation will change dramatically for the worse. Workers will need to counter divisions based on nationality and race and jointly demand to stop the war.

Ultimately though, what is required right now is a dramatic restructuring of the economy. Our fight, the workers' fight, is for an economy structured around the interests of the masses of workers and their families, for health and safety at work, production for need and social development instead of profit, and for a sustainable environment. Realistically the only way this will be achieved is through workers' control of the economy.

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 18th June

'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

Racism is a virus, solidarity is the cure Online Action

Organised by 'Campaign Against Racism and Fascism' 28 May - 11 June
Search Facebook: 'Online Rally: Racism is a Virus, Solidarity is the Cure'

Reconciliation Week - Kutcha Edwards live stream (Performance and Q&A)

Thursday, 28 May 2020 from 11:00-12:30
Search 'Arts in Maroondah' on Facebook

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

ACT ASEN Panel: Intro to Anarchism and Anarchist Organising (Online via Zoom)

Hosted by ASEN (Australian Student Environment Network) and Jura Books
14:00 - 16:00 Saturday, 30 May
us02web.zoom.us/j/83849180984

Injured Workers Day 2020 (Online event)

Monday, 1 June
Search 'Injured Workers Day 2020' on Facebook

The truth: Lost at sea (Film screening & discussion)

'Webinar' over Zoom, presented by Australia Palestine Advocacy Network.
The story of Israel's 2010 attack on the Gaza Freedom Flotilla.
16:00, Sunday, May 31.
[Apan.org.au](https://apan.org.au)

Lasnet open meeting 2020

15:00, Saturday, 13 June
Edinburgh Gardens, Melbourne
Search 'Lasnet Solidarity' on Facebook for details

Other Worlds Zine Fair 2020 (Online event)

31 May - 13 June
Search 'Other Worlds Zine Fair' on Facebook for details

Victorian Socialists Members' Conference

10am - 4pm on Saturday June 20
Details available at
victoriansocialists.org.au

Petition: Scott Morrison must guarantee our health and safety before we return to work

By Victorian Trades Hall Council
megaphone.org.au/petitions/keep-workers-safe

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/In>

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