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 counteracted. 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

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

TWO/ANU/AMWU/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.

NTIU - 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 1st 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 9,500 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 disablons 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 Kohpong 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

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.
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 MEU called a national strike for May 30, and with support from the National Union of Students around 50,000 workers and students mobile around the country to pickets, parliaments, government and ministers’ offices. On the same day 50,000 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 TAFE’s continue to resist privatization; and our public preschools continue their work at the frontlines of the pandemic. There has never been more urgent need to fight for better conditions in public education, and the institutions they build.
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 benefiting 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

**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.