

## BULLETIN · ISSUE 17

2020 is a year of global catalysts. It has been in turns devastating and exhilarating, and we're only halfway through. The draconian police measures implemented when COVID-19 struck brought moderate attention to police but with the death of George Floyd and subsequent eruption of street protests against police brutality across the world, that scrutiny has become laser-focused. Do the police and police unions have any role in the workers movement? **Read on for more.**

Questions? Comments? Email us at:

[we.are.workers.solidarity@gmail.com](mailto:we.are.workers.solidarity@gmail.com)



Emma Davidson  
@eternalproject

### WORKERS IN STRUGGLE

#### Uprising in the USA

The world has watched on as protestors have taken to the streets across the USA following the murder of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer. As protests escalated, Minneapolis bus drivers refused to transport police officers and arrested protestors to jail. Ryan Timlin, president of Amalgamated Transit Union Local 1005 said: "If we feel if something is unjust, then workers should have the right not to support the situation or provide their services." A bus driver in Brooklyn also refused to drive his bus after it had been commandeered by the NYPD to transport arrested protestors. Later the TWU Local 100 tweeted "Bus Operators do not work for the NYPD. We transport the working families of NYC, all TWU Operators should refuse to transport arrested protestors."

#### Australian Paramedic Association NSW - NSW Government

On 1 June, NSW paramedics commenced industrial action in response to the NSW Government's proposed wage freeze for public servants. 97% of members voted in favour of industrial action, and a strategy of omitting patient billing information and chalking ambulances was decided on as it would "hit the NSW Government's pocket and not impact on our patient care." On 2 June, the wage freeze was voted down in the upper house. But with Australia heading into a recession, this is unlikely the last we will hear about public sector wage cuts.

#### CFMEU Mining & Energy - Anglo American Australia

Weeks after a horrific explosion at the Grosvenor mine which badly injured 4 workers, the bosses at the Moranbah North mine have refused to meet with union delegates to hear their concerns about safety. CFMEU Mining President Stephen Smyth said "To refuse a meeting over a false distinction between 'industrial' and 'safety' issues is to pretend that the way people work does not impact on the safety of a mine." He said the workers

were committed to continue to protest outside the mine until bosses would meet with them. Anglo American Australia is the second largest coal producer in Australia.

#### TWU - Deliveroo

The TWU is taking Deliveroo to the Fair Work Commission over the unfair dismissal of Deliveroo driver Diego Franco. Diego was sacked at the height of the pandemic via email. Deliveroo stated he was being sacked because of slow deliveries, but gave no specifics as to when and where these “problems” had happened. The TWU is currently filing an appeal against a Federal Court decision that an UberEats driver could not make a claim for unfair dismissal as the driver was not an employee. Previously the TWU has been successful in an unfair dismissal case for a Foodora rider. A TWU survey of food delivery riders and drivers in Australia shows three out of four are paid below minimum rates and almost 50% of riders had either been injured on the job or knew someone who had. At least four riders have been killed while working.

#### ABS reports record low strike days in March quarter

The ABS reported that 22 disputes occurred in the March quarter, 16 fewer than the previous quarter. 4,000 workers were involved, down from 8,800 in the previous quarter. 64% of activity was in the transport, postal and warehousing industry; and just over half occurred in Victoria. In comparison there were 44 disputes in the March 2019 quarter, 48 in the March 2009 quarter, and 187 in the March 2004 quarter.

#### Health Workers in Sierra Leone

On 1 June, frontline workers who conduct contact tracing in the fight against COVID-19 went on strike. Ambulance drivers, lab technicians and cleaners also joined the strike. The workers are protesting the non-payment of hazard pay allowances. The government owes workers 8 weeks of backpay. On 3 June, doctors in Sierra Leone also threatened to strike with the Sierra Leone Medical and Dental Association (SLMDA) issuing a strike notice with a 48 hour ultimatum to the government to meet all terms of payment contained in an April Memorandum of Understanding or face “massive disruption” of healthcare services.

## BACKBONE OF OUR MOVEMENT



Kath Larkin, Rail, Tram & Bus Union  
Delegate & Deputy Women's Officer

#### How long have you been a union member?

14 years (in various unions)

#### Why did you join the union?

I grew up understanding the importance of not just joining but being an active member of a union. My mother is a nurse and was involved in the rank and file campaign led by Irene Bolger within the nurses union in the 80s, which successfully campaigned to reform the union. Most notably they were able to remove the anti-strike clause in the constitution. And my grandfather was a member of the tramway union and participated in the 1969 general strike to free Clarrie O’Shea. So from my first job in a cafe at 15 I’ve always joined my union.

In becoming a socialist I learnt more about the history of the union movement. I’ve learned that our unions can be schools of the class struggle where workers experience fighting for better conditions at work. But also that in times of strength our struggle is broadened out to fighting for the entire class and standing against all forms of injustice, as the NSW Builders Labourers Federation under Jack Mundey did in the early 1970s.

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

My proudest moment as an RTBU member is when our union took direct action to successfully reverse an unfair and racist sacking of a Vline train conductor. Vline sacked one of our members because he refused to let racist thugs bully international students on his train.

In response to the sacking the union launched a campaign involving members meetings, passing motions and leafleting the public at major stations. Finally we held a snap protest at Southern Cross station in which a Vline service was held up for half an hour.

I was proud to be part of an action that stood against racism, that mobilised rank and file

union members and was prepared to take action beyond the extremely restrictive and unfair laws which aim to prevent unions from taking industrial action.

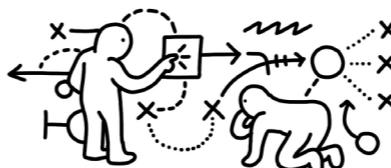
#### What's the most important issue facing the union movement today?

Our priority here and globally must be the rebuilding of a fighting union movement that opposes the inhuman logic of capitalism and refuses to make working class people pay for the crisis. That will fight by any means for safety on the job, for jobs for all and against attacks on pay and conditions. Sadly some union leaders are supporting or even coordinating some of these attacks against workers and it will take a new current of socialists organised in the unions, people like O’Shea, Mundey and Bolger, to make the unions what they should be.

We should take inspiration from the wild cat actions of workers in Italy, Hong Kong and the US as they fight for their lives today. This crisis is just beginning and if you don’t fight you lose.

#### Why should people join their union?

Every decent thing at work and out of it has come about because of generations of collective organising by union members before you. But under capitalism the bosses will always look to increase their profits off our backs. We need strong unions to protect past gains and to extend them to more vulnerable sections of the working class. So join your union to be part of the fight for a fairer workplace and a fairer world.



## OHS MATTERS

Last week we discussed some of the issues relating to returning to work, including the necessity that employers consult with workers and their representatives to ensure measures are taken to minimise risks of infection at the workplace (for example: the physical layout; air conditioning; cleaning and sanitisation; etc).

There are other risks workers may be exposed to when returning to work over which the employer has no control. A big one is the commute. We’ve seen reports of the congested public transport system in the UK as their restrictions are being lifted and workers urged to return to work, and the outrage this caused to the public and the transport unions in particular. This is an example of how things should NOT be done.

UK’s Unite, representing over 80,000 public transport workers, has criticised the government’s unclear guidance on maximum passenger capacity and how to protect passengers and workers during the pandemic. The union has been demanding for months that it be mandatory, not ‘recommended’, for passengers to wear face masks to keep buses and other forms of public transport safe during the pandemic. They are also demanding proper PPE for their members; strict rules on maximum capacity and that government clearly direct transport operators on how to police these rules. Late last week the unions had a win, with the UK government announcing that from June 15 it would be mandatory for public transport users to wear masks. This is a case of ‘better late than never’, but it is clear the government has been too slow to act.

Unfortunately, there seems to be a lot of confusion in Australia as well, with different rules applying in different states.

In Victoria, Daniel Andrews has urged employers to keep workers working at home at least until the end of June, if possible. This should initially reduce the numbers on the state’s public transport – but numbers are increasing already with the gradual return of students to schools, and more employers now expecting workers to start going in to work.

Melburnians have been asked to “reconsider (their) travel” – but a full timetable of buses, trams and trains has been in operation for several weeks. The advice from Public Transport Victoria is that if people must travel then they should do so outside traditional peak hours. To encourage this, train fares are free if passengers touch off before 7.15am. But this won’t be possible for all workers heading back to work.

Many offices are looking at staggered starting and finishing times, and many will need to limit the number of workers on each level, depending on space. Other considerations are numbers of people who can use the lifts at any one time. These measures should help in keeping the numbers of people on Melbourne’s buses, trams and

trains a little lower than ‘normal’ - but this still means potentially a very crowded, and therefore potentially very unsafe, commute.

The Department of Health is said to be ‘meeting daily’ with public transport agencies, developing plans to ‘safely’ move millions of commuters around the city and state each day as the economy re-opens. Dr Annaliese van Diemen, Victoria’s Deputy Chief Health Officer, has flagged “fundamental changes” for public transport, but at this stage said that the current medical advice from ‘the nation’s top infection control experts’ was that masks were not needed by public transport users but that the final position was not yet finalised. The ABC’s health journalist and physician, Dr Norman Swan, however is of the view that all public transport users should wear masks.

## **“In lieu of leadership from the Government, commuters and staff are right to be concerned for their safety”**

Victoria’s Rail Bus and Tram Union (RTBU) has said it is deeply concerned by the lack of clear policy and substantive measures to address social distancing on public transport.

Luba Grigorovitch, the union’s Victorian Branch Secretary said, “With passenger numbers rapidly increasing, advice from medical experts is that more needs to be done to protect the public moving through congested spaces.” After consideration of the available information, she said the RTBU supports calls for clear benchmarks for cleaning and social distancing, as well as measures such as the wearing of masks to be mandatory for commuters using public transport.

Luba said, “In lieu of leadership from the Government, commuters and staff are right to be concerned for their safety. We have written to the Minister for Public Transport regarding numerous key concerns but are yet to receive a response. With RTBU members working on the front line of service delivery, ensuring that essential travel is possible, the increased risks due to unmanaged passenger numbers and additional mitigation strategies begs an urgent response from the Department or Minister.”

According to the union, the government has a responsibility to ensure that all citizens

feel safe around public transport. Clear measures like those implemented in NSW are required if Victorians are to be able to continue moving safely.

The RTBU is calling on the government, department of transport and major operators to engage in immediate consultation to ensure the safety and reliability of public transport into the coming weeks.



### **ANALYSIS**

At first glance, the answer would seem to be yes. Police officers need to sell their labour power to their employer like the rest of us. Nevertheless, the position that police hold in our society and the work that they perform makes them different to almost every other worker. This separation has existed from the very origins of policing and police forces.

While we might think that police have always been around, modern policing as we know it started to develop in the growing urban centres of Europe and North America in the 18th and 19th centuries. Their role from the start was to keep the order, safeguard the institutions and importantly to protect the orderly flow and storage of goods. Given that in most of these growing urban centres, exploitation and poverty were widespread, it is clear who the police were directed to protect and who was supposed to be policed. The role of the police from the very start has always been to act as the keepers of the laws and institutions of the state.

In a newly colonised country like Australia, the police served the additional purpose of protecting and supporting the expansion of the colony into the new lands of inland Australia. Again, it is clear that this role made the police the protectors, if not the enforcers, of the dispossession and the genocide against the Indigenous people. Subsequently, this also meant that police were the ones responsible for enforcing the long running racist and repressive racial segregation laws that the various Australian governments had passed against Aboriginal people. Given this history, it is not surprising that to this day, the police are involved in so many deaths in custody of Aboriginal people.

At an economic level, the police exist to protect private property. We live in a capitalist society where there is widespread inequality and disparities of wealth among the population. Therefore, the police will naturally tend to

## **Are the police workers like the rest of us?**

protect those individuals and organisations that have more wealth. This tendency is reinforced by the laws of the state that give increased freedom of action to corporations and employers. As any worker knows, whenever we take industrial action, go on a demonstration, or establish a picket line, we may be breaking any number of laws. It will then be the police that will come to enforce the laws of the state, whether that means breaking up our demonstration, forcing scabs through our picket lines, handing us fines or arresting us.

Some people may argue that police are all individuals, that there are some very good people in the police force, they are not all racists, and some of them are great community and family members. In addition, the police do come to the aid of some people to prevent deaths or calm down some personal disputes, in at least a temporary fix, of what are complex social problems caused by our capitalist societies. While all this may be true, the fatal flaw with this argument is that it sees the police as a group of separate individuals who are able to operate outside of the structures of society. The reality is that the police force is a highly trained, team orientated, hierarchical (and now increasingly militarised) organisation where commitment, loyalty, and obeying orders, are highly valued and enforced. The orders to be obeyed are the laws of our state that protect private property. In addition, the hierarchy of the police force is totally intertwined with the social and political institutions of the state and its main backers, cementing them to the values, attitudes and goals of the ruling class.

So, to answer the original question, no, the police are not part of the working class. Their history, their social status, their political orientation, their organisational structures, and their role in society is what sets them apart from the rest of us.

They are not welcome in our unions, they are not welcome in our movement.

**Workers Solidarity General Meeting  
(Online via Zoom)**

Third Thursday of every month  
18:00 Thursday 18th June

**Workplace Surveillance and the Future  
of Work (Online event)**

Wednesday June 10, 13:00 - 14:00  
With Jim Stanford from Centre for the  
Future of Work Australiaathome.com.au

**WTF is the go with gas?! (Online event)**

Discussion and training in opposition to  
fracking and gas exploration  
Australian Youth Climate Coalition  
Wednesday 10 June, 17:30-19:00  
[https://www.aycc.org.au/wtf\\_gas](https://www.aycc.org.au/wtf_gas)

**Book launch: Oil under troubled water  
(Online via Zoom)**

Bernard Collaery's new book explores the  
sordid history of Australian government  
dealings with East Timor.  
Thursday 11 June, 19:00  
<https://nibs.org.au/new-events>

**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'

**Mass Workers Meeting - Rebuild Hospo  
(Online via Zoom)**

Hosted by Hospo Voice  
Thursday 11 June, 13:30-15:30  
<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/87401714927>

**Lasnet open meeting 2020**

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

**Media Training for activists (Online via  
Zoom)**

With former ABC correspondent  
Saturday 13 June, 14:00-16:00  
Search Facebook for details

**Forum: After Slutwalk**

Thursday June 18, 18:00  
An online panel discussing rape culture  
and the system that underpins it.  
Search Facebook for details

**Victorian Socialists Members' Conference**

10am - 4pm on Saturday June 20.  
Details available at  
[victoriansocialists.org.au](http://victoriansocialists.org.au)

**Women of Steel (Online film screening)**

Sydney Film Festival  
Documentary about women's successful  
struggle to enter the steel industry in  
Woolongong in the 1980's.  
<https://ondemand.sff.org.au/film/women-of-steel/>

**Online launch: Antisemitism Statement**

Australia Palestine Advocacy Network &  
Australian Jewish Democratic Society  
Monday 22 June, 19:00-21:00  
[crm.apan.org.au](http://crm.apan.org.au)

**Fundraiser: Donate to help Richie from  
the CFMEU pay his unfair ABCC fine**

Victorian Trades Hall Council  
<https://richie.raisely.com/>



**SUBSCRIBE TO THE  
WORKERS SOLIDARITY  
BULLETIN**

UNION DISPUTES / VICTORIES / INDUSTRIAL ACTION / OHS /  
ANALYSIS / EVENTS / CAMPAIGNS / WORKERS' ART

**[workerssolidarity.org.au](http://workerssolidarity.org.au)**