Black Lives Matter protests around the world have centered demands that were previously considered too radical for the mainstream. These ideas didn’t come out of nowhere: they are part of the broader struggle for workers’ rights against all forms of oppression. Our demands must be restated continuously if they are to lead public discourse when the opportunity arises. Read on for more.

Questions? Comments? Email us at: we.are.workers.solidarity@gmail.com

MUA – VICT

VICT, the “robo-terminal” operator at Webb Dock in Melbourne, is “re-activating” its damages claim against the MUA. The claim seeks to recover $80 million in losses and lost income from a picket in 2017. The proceedings first started in the Supreme Court in December 2017, and in 2018 fined the MUA $125,000 for speeches made by union officials to picketers outside the VICT terminal. VICT says there is no other way for them to recover their losses. MUA deputy national secretary Will Tracey said that the claim is “without legal merit and the union will be vigorously defending the matter.”

CFMEU Officials Assaulted

On 30 June, 2 CFMEU officials were assaulted while on a site visit in Melbourne. One of the officials was hospitalised. Following the assault, construction workers and unionists blocked the road outside the site, and returned again the following day before the union ordered dispersal due to fears over COVID-19. Both Victoria Police and the ABCC are investigating. The developers, who illegally demolished the historic Corkman Hotel in Carlton in 2016, are linked to the site where the assault occurred. Every worker deserves to be safe at work – including union officials.

Job Cuts

As the economic crisis deepens, more workers are being sacked, stood down and laid off. Some of the recent job cut announcements include:

- Qantas – 6000 jobs; Australia Post – 2000 jobs;
- Target – 1000 jobs; News Corp – 1000 jobs; Foxtel – 250 jobs; ABC – 250 jobs; Myer – 90 jobs;
- CSIRO – 50 jobs; National Gallery – 30 jobs.

This incomplete list does not cover jobs lost in the university sector, casual workers, and individual workers at smaller businesses. The Government is currently conducting a review of the JobKeeper and JobSeeker measures which are due to expire in September. Without these measures, many more workers will lose their jobs and face increased economic difficulties.

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COVID-19

The pandemic continues to present industrial issues for workers. The RTBU in Victoria is now demanding that cloth face masks be mandatory on public transport. There have been 6 positive COVID-19 cases at a Coles Distribution Centre in Laverton (VIC) – but no shut down for deep cleaning and no paid pandemic leave for staff. Meanwhile, there have been more deficiencies in processes with labour hire security guards at “quarantine hotels” in Melbourne including a lack of training, insufficient PPE, and guards being urged not to get tested for COVID-19. As predicted, the consequences of the pandemic are much more severe for those workers just one such precarious, precarious and low-paid jobs.

CFMEU – NSW Green Ban

The CFMEU has put a Green Ban on the demolition of the Willow Grove and St Georges Terraces buildings in Parramatta which have been earmarked for destruction by the NSW Government as part of their plans for the new Powerhouse Parramatta. NSW Branch Secretary Darren Greenfield said local residents had tried to work with the Berejiklian Government, but they have been ignored. “This is the first Green Ban the CFMEU has put in place since the recent passing of Jack Mundey who was one of our union’s pioneers of the last century and community activists to fight for our shared built, cultural and environmental heritage.”

Haft Tappeh Sugarcane Company – Iran

At the time of writing, workers at the Haft Tappeh Sugarcane Company have been on strike for 48 days. They have taken strike action as the employer has not paid wages for nearly a year and a half. Some workers have also demonstrated and have not resumed work after the government promised to return their health insurance. The workers are demanding immediate payment of all their wages, a lack of training, insufficient PPE, and guards being urged not to get tested for COVID-19. As predicted, the consequences of the pandemic are much more severe for those workers just one such precarious, precarious and low-paid jobs.

Migrant Domestic Workers – Lebanon

There are an estimated 250,000 migrant workers in Lebanon, the majority are domestic workers working under the kafala system which has been likened to modern-slavery. As the economic crisis in Lebanon worsens, hundreds of workers have been unable to return home. However with months or even years’ worth of wages owed, even if the airport was opened many workers would be unable to afford a ticket back home. They are now unemployed, homeless and in an incredibly vulnerable position.

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

I think membership is the age-old issue that is still relevant today. Membership rates across the country are in long-term decline and the economy is based more and more on Union-adverse industries. Even in my sector, higher education, membership rates are nowhere as high as they should be. This is a big concern. It’s contributing to the overall decline in general workplace standards and broader economic struggles. A direct line can be drawn between declining wage rates, declining prospects of home ownership, and overall anxiety in society with union membership levels. Most of the strength and all of the positives that Unions can provide flow straight from strong membership rates. More members!

Why should people join their union?

In my sector at least, it’s a no brainer!

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

As an immigrant, I could see how Australia had better working conditions in higher education compared to other countries I previously worked in. Lower pay, more super contributions, long service leave, and other benefits. I recognised that this was the result of the work of my union, the RTBU.

Going back decades, the members had been pushing for better conditions, and I had the chance to benefit from their victories. So I felt I needed to pay them back. Furthermore, I wanted to be able to pass those benefits to the future workers in my sector. It’s our responsibility, I believe, to honour the struggle of those who came before us, and pass it on to those who will come after us. Unions are a way to achieve this.

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

No one moment stands out, but I enjoy all the little victories our union gets against employers. Especially when they are to protect cherished values I have as an academic. There has been two this year that I enjoyed.

The University of Sydney had to re-instate a lecturer who had been dismissed on the grounds of not publishing enough work in the ‘right’ journals. The Fair Work Commission rightly reproached the University for being ‘obsessed’ with spurious ranking systems. Likewise, a colleague at Murdoch University was facing adverse action for speaking openly about alarming practices within the University. The University eventually withdrew legal proceedings after a successful union campaign. Without the RTBU acting in our interests, our employers would have run roughshod over core principles that are essential to critical and free inquiry in the higher education sector.

In the past week there has been an increase in alarms with the number of new COVID-19 infections growing in Victoria in numbers not seen since the middle of the pandemic. The number is still extremely low if we look at other countries – for example the hotspots councils of New South Wales and Hume had 26 and 52 active cases respectively early last week. However, the number of new infections in the state of Victoria on Monday (20 June) were 28, the highest since the peak in April, illustrating we cannot be complacent.

The current clusters have not involved meat processing plants or abattoirs – in fact Victoria has seen zero cases of COVID-19 outbreak: at Cedar Meats in Brooklyn in early May.

This edition’s OHS Matters looks at why abattoirs and meat processing plants seem to be particularly prone to outbreaks of COVID-19 among workers. One of the factors is staggering – and the cases continue, despite more being known about the virus and why such outbreaks might occur.

In May there were reports from Europe, the US and Canada of large outbreaks in meat processing plants. Countries such as France, Spain, UK, Ireland and even Germany, which has to date had relatively few COVID-19 cases in meatworks, have had outbreaks. The figures are staggering – and the cases continue, despite more being known about the virus and why such outbreaks might occur.

In the US, by mid-May over 5000 meat workers had contracted COVID-19. Yet, with panic regarding adequate meat supply for American BBQs, in a typically cavalier move, Trump invoked the Defense Production Act in late April to reopen infected slaughterhouses and meat processing plants and to be absolutely sure they get back on line. The directive of whether workers were infected or not. By late June, we got reports that the number of meat workers who had contracted COVID-19 had increased to more than 24,000, with at least 91 fatalities.

In Germany, which seemed to be on track in terms of recovery, more than 650 people tested positive for the virus at a meat processing plant operated by Tönnies Gmbh in B愦lern, in the district of Detmold in North Rhine-Westphalia. By last week that number had increased to over 1550. When the outbreak was first identified, the government closed the plant as well as schools and childcare centres in the area. Then last week as the numbers grew, it announced that restaurants, bars and gyms in the Detmold district would close for a week. Outdoor gatherings of more than two people are again prohibited.

Many of the workers in the German plant come from Romania, and live in shared accommodation – when they return home the virus has entered a population. Last month, Germany agreed a proposal banning the use of temporary workers at COVID-19-affected meatworks, but clearly this has not been enough.

So – why are we seeing these outbreaks in meat processing plants? Simply put: poor working conditions and poor pay.

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Conditions: The common wisdom seems to be that abattoirs are cold and damp, making them ideal for the virus to thrive. Yet according to the Victorian branch of the Meat Industry Employees Union (AMIEU), this is too broad a description. Some areas in abattoirs, such as the ‘boning out’ and slaughter sections, such as the ‘kill floor’ are hot and humid.

Proximity: In many meat processing plants, workers have to work very close to each other. Depending on the workplace set up, the processes and work flow can make physical distancing impossible. This is certainly the case in the US where most of the places are non-unionised and workers are literally shoulder to shoulder, working much less than one metre apart. In Australia, there is more distance between workers, due to the efforts of the union. The push for distancing predates the COVID-19. Rather, it was to minimise the risk to workers’ safety in a process where the standards are knives and cleavers.

Particularly in the USA the work is stressful, even during ‘normal’ times, the industry has an appalling OHS record, with many workers suffering serious injuries. The workers are low paid, often temporary or labour hire workers and work long, gruelling hours, sometimes 12 hours shifts separated by no breaks. And because they are not permanent, they are less likely to speak up or not to go to work if they have any symptoms or feel they have sick pay. In addition to all of this, there are often cultural and/or language factors as well.

A BBC investigation into one of the early outbreaks in the UK, at a pork processing plant in Smithfield, South Dakota, in early April, found that the workers were classified as being ‘essential’, and like other ‘essential’ workers in many countries, they earned significantly less than the average job across America, in some cases by significant margins. The workforce at Smithfield was predominantly non-white and non-English speaking, mostly from places like Myanmar, Ethiopia, Nepal, Congo and El Salvador. There are 80 different languages spoken in the plant. Estimates of the mean hourly wage range from USD14-16 an hour.

Once again, however, the situation is not as dire for such workers in Australia because where the sites are unionised, the conditions are better because the Health & Safety Representatives are active. The work is hard, repetitive and difficult and HSRs regularly argue that workers should not be working 10-12 hours.

Let’s look in some detail at the one meatworks related outbreak we have had. The Cedar Meats outbreak, in April/May of this year, has accounted for 111 cases of COVID-19 (workers and their related outbreak we have had. The Cedar Meats outbreak, in April/May of this year, has accounted for 111 cases of COVID-19 (workers and their late May and early June saw the biggest wave of COVID cases in the US and elsewhere – partly because the Meat Processing plants were open during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Cedar Meats outbreak in Minnesota saw a description. Some areas in abattoirs, such as the ‘boning out’ and slaughter sections, such as the ‘kill floor’ are hot and humid.
“Today, militant protests against police brutality have fundamentally changed the terrain of struggle and revived mass action as the way to win social change.”

What’s more, police repression has failed to dampen the turnout or win public sympathy. Instead, the protests have exposed the flaws in the logic that police can be among our best safety measures against violence. More police can be attributed to the 2016 and 2020 presidential failures across the country. There have been many inspiring examples of the role that armed agents of the state are playing in the streets and to navigate the danger of a possible resurgence of COVID-19 in the fall. What’s more, police repression has failed to dampen the turnout or win public sympathy. Instead, the protests have exposed the flaws in the logic that police can be among our best safety measures against violence. More police can be attributed to the 2016 and 2020 presidential failures across the country. There have been many inspiring examples of the role that armed agents of the state are playing in the streets and to navigate the danger of a possible resurgence of COVID-19 in the fall. What’s more, police repression has failed to dampen the turnout or win public sympathy. Instead, the protests have exposed the flaws in the logic that police can be among our best safety measures against violence. More police can be attributed to the 2016 and 2020 presidential failures across the country. There have been many inspiring examples of the role that armed agents of the state are playing in the streets and to navigate the danger of a possible resurgence of COVID-19 in the fall. What’s more, police repression has failed to dampen the turnout or win public sympathy. Instead, the protests have exposed the flaws in the logic that police can be among our best safety measures against violence. More police can be attributed to the 2016 and 2020 presidential failures across the country. There have been many inspiring examples of the role that armed agents of the state are playing in the streets and to navigate the danger of a possible resurgence of COVID-19 in the fall.
WHAT’S ON

Workers Solidarity General Meeting
Online via Zoom
Third Thursday of every month
Next meeting: Thursday 16th July, 18:00
Workerssolidarity.org.au

Learn Our Truth Series:
Stop Blak Deaths in Custody
Live video / Online event
National Indigenous Youth Education Coalition and 2 others
Tuesday, 7 July 19:00

Weekly Protest in front of
Mantra Hotel/Prison
In solidarity with imprisoned refugees
Saturday 11th and 18th July 15:00-16:00
Mantra Bell City, 215 Bell Street, Preston
Search ‘facebook’ for more details

136th The Durham Miners’ Gala
Live online streamed event
Includes archive footage from the Gala’s long history, brass band music, messages from key workers who’ve been dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic, and contributions from leading UK workers movement figures
Saturday 11 July, from 10pm Melbourne time
Streamed on Facebook and YouTube

Two day Online Course
Organised by the ACTU and the First Nations Workers Alliance
Running regularly from now until November
atui.org.au/voice-treaty-truth-advocacy-course

The Future of Public Transport in Victoria – Online Forum
Organised by Friends of the Earth
Wednesday, 15 July 18:00-19:30
melbournefoe.org.au/transport_forum

After Trinity: 75 years of Nuclear Resistance - Webinar
International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN)
Thursday, 16 July from midday
icanw.org.au

Victorian Socialists Council Election Campaign Launch
Public Event
Sunday, July 19th 14:00 - 17:00
Check facebook.com/vicsocialists for details

Rally: 7 Years Too Long – Free the Refugees
Refugee Action Collective Victoria
Saturday, 18 July 14:00-16:00
State Library Victoria
Search ‘facebook’ for more details

Defend the Right to Protest – Free the Refugees
Protest outside magistrates court to defend the right to protest and to free the refugees who have been held in detention for 7 years
Organised by Refugee Action Collective Victoria
Thursday 6th August 8:00am
(protest: 8am, court mention: 9.30am)
See Facebook event for more details

The Worker’s Solidarity Bulletin is a living document written to reflect what is happening within the labour movement, here in Australia and across the world. The producers of this publication, and participants in Workers Solidarity more broadly, don’t necessarily endorse or agree with all of the views in this publication. This is a place for debate and discussion.

See something you disagree with? Not seeing something you think we should talk about?

Shoot us a line with your thoughts at
workers.solidarity@gmail.com