

Great Depression-like mass jobless queues across Australia

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24 March 2020

The contempt and indifference of capitalist governments toward the working class is being graphically displayed in Australia, with huge queues of jobless workers outside the government's Centrelink welfare offices across the country.

In scenes not seen since the mass unemployment of the Great Depression of the 1930s, workers who have lost their livelihoods due to the criminally inadequate response of governments to the COVID-19 pandemic are being further exposed to unsafe and dangerous conditions as they wait for hours to try to lodge welfare claims.

Yesterday, lines of up to 200 metres snaked around entire city and suburban blocks. From 4.30 am today, well before dawn, the scenes were repeated.

As the number of officially-recorded coronavirus infections in Australia spiralled toward 2,000 today, these queues will only add to the spread, even though people in the lines tried to keep distances between each other. Unless the current rate of infection—which is quadrupling each week—is halted, the total will reach nearly six million people in six weeks.

“They are treating us like cattle,” one worker said in a queue at Stones Corner in Brisbane. In fact, even cattle would not be exposed so contemptuously to the obvious danger of infection in such queues, which made a mockery of the “social distancing” measures of the federal and state governments.

Tense moods and angry incidents were reported in many locations. At Redfern in Sydney, people coming out of the Centrelink office reported irate and chaotic scenes inside. At a South Australian office, people left outside were “banging on the door—they weren't happy,” a worker noted.

Distressed people, many of whom have never applied for welfare before, told reporters they feared losing their homes due to mortgage or rent bills they could no longer pay.

Aware of rising social discontent, the federal and state governments mobilised police and security guards to prevent unrest erupting in the queues, especially when offices close at 5 pm with thousands of people still in the lines.

Typically, the federal government of Prime Minister Scott Morrison arrogantly declared last night that workers did not need to be in the queues because they could lodge “intentions to claim” online. But the government's MyGov website also crashed yesterday because it exceeded its capacity, said to be

55,000 claims.

According to the government, 95,000 people tried to access MyGov yesterday, about twice what it claimed to have prepared for. But that number is only a small fraction of the hundreds of thousands of workers who have suddenly lost their jobs because of the shutdowns of hospitality and other industries.

Much worse is soon to come as the shutdowns are extended to retail and other “non-essential” industries that employ millions of people. In a sign of what is to come, Michael Hill jewellers today moved to shut its 300 stores indefinitely and sack 2,500 workers.

Behind the scenes, the ruling class is discussing plans for even greater social tensions. “Senior sources” in the banking and the forecasting sectors told Nine Entertainment newspapers that their analysis showed Australia was headed for an unemployment rate of 15 percent or more.

That would mean at least two million jobless, plus many more “under-employed.” During the Great Depression, Australia's jobless rate exceeded 30 percent, reflecting Australian capitalism's vulnerability to global breakdowns.

The government-ordered shutdowns and related lockdowns have become necessary because of the failure of the same Liberal-National and Labor governments, and the corporate elite they serve, to implement the basic measures that have proven essential globally to curbing the pandemic: mass testing, tracking and quarantining.

Last week, World Health Organisation (WHO) director general Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus again warned, as the WHO has done since February, that countries are not testing enough for the virus, likening their approach to “fighting a fire blindfolded.”

For all the governments' empty claims that its pro-business economic packages would save jobs, employers are ruthlessly laying off workers. Yesterday alone, the Woolworths-owned ALH Group—the country's biggest pubs, pokies and hotels business—stood down some 8,000 of its 15,000 workforce.

Helloworld Travel stood down 1,300 staff and made another 275 employees redundant. Federal Group, Tasmania's largest private employer which operates two casinos, hotels and pubs, stood down 1,500 workers.

While governments are allocating billions of dollars to bail out the banks and corporations, workers are bearing the brunt of this historic public health and economic crisis.

The *Australian* reported that IBISWorld data shows the closure of non-essential services, including pubs, cafes, gyms, cinemas, casinos, amusement parks and zoos, would cost about 300,000 jobs and erase \$10 billion in workers' wages.

The Morrison government initially announced that MyGov crashed because of a malicious "cyber attack." That scare-mongering claim, like most of the federal and state governments' messages throughout the pandemic, soon proved to be false.

The truth is that MyGov cannot cope with the demand because, once again, insufficient and unconcerned preparations were made for this human catastrophe. Desperate workers trying to get through to Centrelink by phone experienced impossible delays. Even before this crisis, as many as 55 million phone calls to the government's Services Australia went unanswered each year.

As with the public hospitals and health services, Centrelink and other government "human services" have been gutted for years by staff and resourcing cuts, as well as the widespread privatisation or outsourcing of essential functions for the benefit of corporate profit-making.

Many working class households have no choice but to join physical queues. According to an Australian Council of Social Services advisory issued yesterday, "many people do not have a phone line or enough phone credit," "about 2.6 million people do not use the internet" and "1.3 million households don't even have access to the internet."

This reflects the growing social divide between the wealthy elite and the rest of the population, including the most impoverished and vulnerable members of the working class.

As for the "supercharged welfare net" proclaimed by Morrison, the promised doubling of jobless and related benefits to a still poverty-line \$1,100 a fortnight will not commence until late April.

The estimated 650,000 New Zealand citizens living in Australia, often settled in the country for many years, are not even entitled to any payments. Since 2001, they have been classified as "non-protected special category visa-holders." Nearly 50,000 people have so far signed a petition calling for benefit eligibility.

They are among 2.4 million temporary visa holders in Australia, mostly workers, students and refugees, who cannot leave the country because of travel restrictions and who have none or very limited welfare entitlements.

Several further developments highlighted the governments' cover-up of their lack of preparation for this predictable disaster.

The acute shortage of testing kits, which has led to tests being strictly restricted, was laid bare yesterday when a Melbourne-based company, MD Solutions, secured Therapeutic Goods

Administration approval to import about 500,000 kits. But they will not arrive for at least a fortnight.

Health Minister Greg Hunt admitted in parliament yesterday that millions of face masks, which the Morrison government had promised on March 8, were diverted to another country. That is because of a global shortage and a scramble by other unprepared governments for supplies.

On March 8, Hunt had issued a media release claiming that obtaining the face masks showed that the Morrison government was "ahead of the curve," adding: "Our approach puts the health and wellbeing of all Australians at the forefront of everything we are doing to deal with this evolving health crisis."

Exactly the opposite is true. Everything the Liberal-National and Labor governments do is geared to the profit interests of the corporate giants. On top of allowing cruise ship companies to offload thousands of infected or potentially infected passengers, these governments are permitting airports to push planeloads of passengers arriving from overseas out into society without health checks.

An *Australian* correspondent who returned on the weekend reported: "At the airport, there were few precautions taken to prevent the spread of coronavirus: no small group checking for symptoms, no thermal scanning of passengers, no individual temperature checks and little questioning by Australian Border Force staff..."

"Like hundreds of other passengers, we compulsorily exited through duty free. There were no restrictions on handling alcohol, perfume, chocolate bars, clothing or kids' toys. The staff there were friendly and eager to make a sale."

These revelations show the burning necessity to transform all these basic industries into publicly-owned and democratically-controlled organisations, in order to produce urgently required medical equipment and protect the lives of millions of people. That will happen only through the industrial and political mobilisation of the working class on the basis of a socialist program.



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