

Australian unions and employers demand workers stay on building sites despite pandemic

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Despite the spread of the potentially deadly COVID-19 virus, Australian trade unions are working with employer organisations to keep workers on the job, and cut their wages and conditions, in order to safeguard corporate profits.

In one of the most dangerous examples, the construction unions in the state of Victoria last week formed a “working party” with building employer groups, such as the Master Builders Association, to press the state Labor government to exempt the sector from shutdown measures.

A joint statement on March 18 claimed that “mitigating controls” overseen by the unions and employers are being implemented across the sector, so “special considerations be given to no blanket closures.”

The “working party” said the “construction industry environment is significantly different from others, with the ability to socially distance on sites and isolate groups” and “exposure to fresh air and light is very high for much of the time and on a large amount of the site.”

The danger to building workers was quickly demonstrated this week when a worker on the \$190 million New Student Precinct project at the University of Melbourne was diagnosed with COVID-19.

The truth is that close contact is unavoidable on work sites, especially on large projects that can have hundreds of workers on site at any one time, including contractors and sub-contractors who may move around different work locations, heightening their risk of exposure.

Moreover, multiple workers handle tools, equipment and building materials, creating the potential for the virus to spread. According to a study conducted at the University of California, Los Angeles, the coronavirus can survive on hard surfaces such as plastic and stainless steel for up to 72 hours and on cardboard for up to 24

hours.

Opposition is erupting among construction workers. Several workers have told the *Melbourne Age* that the Construction, Forestry, Maritime, Mining and Energy Union (CFMMEU) is actively deleting posts on its Facebook page questioning the wisdom of continuing to allow construction sites to operate. There is clear evidence that social-distancing rules, of keeping at least 1.5 metres from others, are not being followed on work sites.

Speaking to the *Australian Financial Review*, CFMMEU national secretary Dave Noonan admitted: “Social distancing on sites is a constant challenge. I’m not going to pretend in every circumstance everyone is a statutory distance away from each other. But we’ve got to do our best and people in the main are doing our best.”

The March 18 statement, entitled “Collaborative Partnership Pathway for Construction Industry,” insisted: “[I]n these challenging times, in the spirit of cooperation, it is critical that all stakeholders work together to ensure the protection of both workers and the building and construction industry.”

The record of the employers and the unions demonstrates that workers cannot trust them “to ensure the protection of workers.” For decades the unions have suppressed opposition by workers to the drive by construction companies to slash working conditions, increase the use of contract labour and undermine safety standards to meet deadlines, cut costs and maximise profits.

As a result, the construction sector is the third most dangerous industry by workplace fatalities. Nine construction workers have been killed so far this year. In 2019 there were 22 deaths and for the three years before the total was a staggering 110.

The union bureaucrats and the corporate elite have

joined hands because they are well aware that many workers internationally are walking out and closing down workplaces in non-essential industries. This includes wildcat strikes in auto plants in the US, in defiance of the United Auto Workers (UAW) union, and similar walkouts in Italy, Spain and Canada against union-management efforts to continue production despite unsafe conditions.

The “working party” even called for measures to protect companies that lay off workers. It proposed Victorian Building and Industry Disputes Panel guidelines to specify that “employers can legitimately request workers use annual, personal leave and accrued RDOs (Rostered Days Off) if stood down” and for workers to access redundancy and industry superannuation fund “hardship payments.”

Across all industries, the unions are determined to utilise the coronavirus crisis to prove that they are indispensable to big business and to entrench themselves even more firmly as a part of the official establishment. They are not workers’ organisations, but industrial police forces. Cbus, the joint CFMMEU-employers’ superannuation fund controls \$56 billion of its members funds. It is one of the biggest investors in the building industry and has a direct interest in maintaining uninterrupted production.

In the mining industry, the CFMMEU has backed government plans to exempt fly-in fly-out (FIFO) workers on remote sites from travel restrictions, overriding opposition by indigenous and other local communities that such mass transportations will bring COVID-19 into their regions.

To protect their own lives and those of the public, workers must take matters into their own hands. Rank-and-file committees must be established, completely independent of the unions, to organise the fight to close down all non-essential workplaces immediately. All laid-off or sacked workers must receive full pay, financed by the corporations and government resources.

All manufacturing must be redirected to the production of urgent necessities, including health care equipment, and the construction of healthcare facilities. The very best protective measures must be established across such workplaces, overseen by the workers themselves, with the advice of scientists and health care professionals.

Every effort must be made to reach out to workers internationally to coordinate a unified global response along these lines, raising the necessity for the complete reorganisation of society on a socialist basis. That is, the working class must take democratic control over the

industries, place them under public ownership and organise production for human need, not private profit.

The CFMMEU’s partnership with the construction and mining giants typifies the role of the unions in bolstering corporate profit at the expense of their own members.

In the latest example, the Australian Services Union struck a deal with employers to slash penalty rates and minimum shift rules for about one million white collar workers now working from home. The agreement extends the spread of working hours that do not attract penalty rates from 6am through to 11pm on Mondays to Fridays and 7am to 12.30pm on Saturdays. Minimum allowable shifts for casuals and part-timers will be two hours.

Earlier, the United Workers Union joined the hotel industry employers in a similar pact to reduce minimum hours and relax classifications rules.

These agreements are described as temporary, for the duration of the COVID-19 disaster, but they set precedents that the employers will exploit to restructure their operations permanently.

The Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) is leading this push, backing the multi-billion dollar government handouts to big business and trying to prevent resistance to mass layoffs.

When Qantas stood down 20,000 workers just days after the federal government handed the airline companies a \$715 million assistance package, the ACTU went into damage control. It urged the government to give workers “a seat at the table”—“through their unions” in designing “these corporate bailouts.”

Even though Qantas had just spearheaded the ruthless corporate mass sackings that are now spreading throughout the economy, the ACTU stated: “We support government providing stimulus and financial support to industry in order to protect local jobs.”

That is, behind the fraudulent claim of defending jobs, the unions support handing over billions more dollars to the large corporations, which already have extracted massive profits over the past two decades alone by eliminating thousands of jobs and driving up the rate of exploitation of the working class.



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