

Australian construction workers denounce union enforcement of unsafe conditions

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Hundreds of workers across the country have taken to social media over the past weeks to denounce the construction union for enforcing continued production in the sector, despite the health risks posed by the coronavirus pandemic.

The Construction, Forestry, Maritime, Mining and Energy Union (CFMMEU) has responded with censorship. Supporters of the union bureaucracy have also crudely denounced workers critical of the CFMMEU and downplayed the dangers of COVID-19, demonstrating their contempt for workers' health and safety.

Yesterday, the *Age* revealed that administrators of a Victorian CFMMEU Facebook page were mass deleting comments by union members demanding an industry shutdown and condemning the corporatist character of the organisation. Indicating the scale of the censorship, the newspaper stated that it had received over 100 screenshots of comments that had been removed.

Union officials responded to the revelation by citing their social media policy, which bans "abusive posts," along with content that is "unlawful or misleading or totally irrelevant." In other words, criticism of the union and its well-paid officials is not allowed.

The posts quoted by the *Age* were clearly "relevant" to the conditions confronting workers. One deleted comment stated: "At the end of the day we are a commodity which is easily replaced. We are economic fodder."

Another said: "I work in construction and really think it's unsafe for sites to be open. The CFMEU closes sites when there is two drops of rain but yet a killer virus seems to be OK." One simply stated: "Worker dues before health, it's disgusting."

A worker who spoke to the *Age*, explained: "I wrote on one of the posts 'I would rather be at home' and that comment got deleted. I don't see anything wrong with that comment, it's probably how 90 percent of CFMEU members feel."

In an indication that the anger is not limited to the state of Victoria, the national CFMMEU construction Facebook page has also been inundated with workers condemning the union.

In response to a video of CFMMEU national construction secretary Dave Noonan declaring last month that "we are all in this together," and "the union is with you," one worker wrote: "You don't look after us in the best of times lol boys in Melbourne getting sacked by the hundreds months ago and you didn't do a thing. As long as we pay our dues you are happy. We will remember this!"

Another wrote: "It should be up to the workers to decide if we want to be at work or not. Can the CFMMEU guarantee that we are safe? No, you can't because this is unknown." The worker stated that union officials had instructed members that they would be safe if they were only in closely-confined quarters together for 15 minutes or less. He noted that this contradicted the statements of medical experts and doctors.

Another wrote: "No soap no hand sanitizer over crowded alimaks. Who are you trying to kid??? Social distancing just cannot work on a building site."

The administrators of the CFMMEU national page have not carried out the same blatant censorship as their Victorian colleagues. Instead, the union has simply stopped posting content to the page, in a bid to prevent it becoming a centre for further discussion.

The comments, and the anti-democratic response of the CFMMEU, give expression to an emerging rebellion against the union, which, like its counterparts across every industry, has functioned as an industrial police force of the corporations for decades.

The union has taken this role to a new level since widespread coronavirus infections began in Australia last February. Working closely with state and federal governments and industry associations, it has insisted that

construction is an “essential” sector of the economy and must continue regardless of the spread of the virus.

This claim is clearly bogus. The vast bulk of construction activity involves the development of residential properties along with buildings to be used by corporations and big business. The sole concern of the union is that the boom in the industry, which generates an annual revenue of around \$360 billion, continues at all costs.

Workers have widely reported that they are unable to practice social distancing on most construction sites. They have stated that they have been provided with little or no additional protective equipment, such as face masks. Many have said that they have been kept in the dark and provided with no information by companies or the unions about the risks that they confront.

Already, there have been at least two confirmed cases of coronavirus on major building sites in Melbourne. The sites were temporarily closed after a worker at each of them received the diagnosis. They were reopened, however.

In one of the cases, at Multiplex’s \$2.8 billion Melbourne Square development, workers were forced back onto the job without any indication of whether the virus was still present on the site, or if other colleagues were infected.

Earlier this month, the *Age* published part of the transcript of a meeting between a number of the workers and a CFMMEU representative. The union official professed ignorance, declaring that, he had been told nothing by health authorities. Signalling the union’s support for an unsafe resumption of work, he said that individuals could go home if they wished, but that they would not be paid.

When the details of the exchange were revealed, Noonan blithely repeated the claim that construction was “essential” and must proceed. The Melbourne Square development, however, does not involve the construction of hospitals or other publicly-necessary facilities. Instead, its purpose is to create a massive high-end retail complex and hundreds of upmarket apartments.

The CFMMEU and its predecessors have for decades jeopardised the safety of its members to ensure corporate profits. This has resulted in the sector being listed as the third most dangerous in the country. In 2019, there were 22 deaths on the job. This followed 110 fatalities over the previous three years.

In many instances, union safety officials had been warned by workers that conditions were unsafe, but had

done nothing and had enforced continued production.

The union has also overseen the destruction of tens of thousands of jobs, which has facilitated the ever-greater use of casual and contract labour. As the 2015 Royal Commission into union corruption revealed, the CFMMEU has the closest of ties with property developers and construction companies, including those that have laid-off workers and withheld their entitlements.

The role of the CFMMEU in the present crisis is replicated across the board. Unions all over the country are tearing up existing inadequate conditions and instituting even more draconian work regimes. Sally McManus, the head of the Australian Council of Trade Unions, is collaborating with the federal Coalition government on a daily basis as it hands billions of dollars to the very corporations that are sacking workers amid the slump.

This demonstrates that to defend their social rights, including to protect their health and lives from the pandemic, workers must break with the unions and form new organisations of struggle, including independent rank-and-file committees.

Such organisations would be tasked with coordinating a genuine industrial and political campaign for the immediate closure of the construction industry and all other non-essential sectors. They would be confronted with the necessity of fighting for a workers’ government to place the major corporations that dominate the sector under public ownership and democratic workers’ control.

We invite all construction workers looking for a way forward politically, or seeking to share their experiences, to contact the Socialist Equality Party at sep@sep.org.au



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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