

The coronavirus pandemic and the fight for socialism in Australia

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The following speech was delivered by Socialist Equality Party (Australia) assistant national secretary Cheryl Crisp to the 2020 International May Day Online Rally held by the World Socialist Web Site and the International Committee of the Fourth International on May 2.

One aspect of the coronavirus pandemic is that the experiences facing the broad mass of the world's population are international ones. This virus knows no borders, and even in countries such as Australia, which appear, at present, to have lower infection and death rates, the situation can change very rapidly.

Here, there are almost 6,800 infections, with 93 deaths. While infection rates are reportedly down, so is testing. But deaths are increasing. The Actuaries Institute has stated that the infection rate could be six times higher than the government is declaring.

But this has not prevented the drive for a return to work, which has reached a crescendo. Business and corporations are demanding that the economy be restarted to restore profit levels, no matter what the risk.

Open discussions are being held on the “death calculus,” to determine whether the cost of saving lives is worth it. The calculation is that if the limited lockdown is maintained, it would save an extra 3000 lives, but at a cost of \$9 million each—something regarded as too costly.

Governments have widely acknowledged that lifting restrictions will result in increased infections and death. What is being established is life with coronavirus.

Teachers have been especially targeted because, without reopening the schools, there will be no restart of the economy. There is seething anger among educators for being used as guinea pigs. Similar opposition exists on building sites, and factories, which

the unions have ensured remain open, despite the risk of infection. Hundreds of health workers have been infected due to chronic shortages of PPE. In Tasmania, due to the high numbers of infections, two hospitals were closed, all the staff and their families quarantined, and the hospitals taken over by the military.

The reopening of the economy is conditional on the uptake, by at least 40 percent of the population, of a tracing app, which can be used to increase surveillance on the population. In the inevitable event of outbreaks, local areas will be locked down with the possible use of the military.

The government's bailout packages of \$320 billion—the largest in history and almost 10 times that during the 2008-9 global financial crisis bailout—has resulted in the further transfer of wealth from the poor to the rich. This handout was agreed by what is, in effect, a de facto national unity cabinet, made up of the federal Coalition government and state premiers—most of whom lead state Labor governments.

27.4 percent of the population is either unemployed or underemployed. The much vaunted JobKeeper program, initiated to purportedly save millions of jobs, has been revealed as a fraud. At least 2 million people—overseas students and casuals—are unable to even apply for it. The demand for food banks has increased by more than 150 percent, as the almost 4 million people, thrown out of work overnight, struggle to maintain their existence.

The bailout package will have to be paid back—through cuts to government expenditure on education, health and social programs, and a wholesale assault on the conditions of the working class.

The pandemic is being used as the pretext for the destruction of workers' pay levels and working conditions—something that governments have been

unable to achieve for 20 years. With the total complicity of the peak union body, the ACTU [Australian Council of Trade Unions], and the Labor Party, award rights (that is, contract rights and conditions) are being scrapped. ACTU president, Sally McManus, has assured the government that it can get everything it wants, as far as changing award conditions, through cooperation with the unions, rather than through legislation.

She allayed the government's fears that this would take too long, by pointing to changes to two awards, covering 2.5 million workers, in just one week, claiming "no fuss" was required. With the stroke of a pen, penalty rates (that is wage increases for working outside normal hours) were eliminated, and the level of minimum hours reduced.

What has been exposed through the response of all the political representatives of capitalism, whether the Liberal-National coalition or Labor governments, the Greens or the unions, is that workers cannot defend their conditions, their rights and now their very lives, through these organisations and under capitalism.

The experience of the past months has presented the real face of capitalism—a system that constitutes the greatest threat to mankind. Workers, young people and professionals must fight for a socialist internationalist perspective, the only means by which society can go forward.

This requires the building of a new revolutionary socialist leadership in the working class—the Socialist Equality Parties and the International committee of the Fourth International. I urge you to join our party today.



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