

Australia: Twelve fast food outlets closed in Melbourne after coronavirus outbreak

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Twelve McDonald's outlets in Melbourne, Victoria were shut down on Monday after a delivery driver tested positive for COVID-19. The driver was a close contact of a previously confirmed case at the Craigieburn McDonald's, which was closed last Friday.

Twelve people have now tested positive for the coronavirus as a result of the cluster, which began at the fast food chain's Fawkner location, in the city's north. The first case at Fawkner was confirmed on May 5, but the Victorian Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) did not call for the outlet to be closed until after a second worker tested positive on May 8.

As was the case with the Melbourne Cedar Meats abattoir outbreak, now linked to 103 confirmed cases, the slow response of the state health authorities was allegedly because the first worker to test positive was believed not to have been infectious while at work.

Victoria's Chief Health Officer Brett Sutton said: "[It's a] coincidence in the sense that the early individual hadn't given it to the later individuals, but they're probably all linked through some undetermined family and friends."

The statement is reminiscent of an unfounded public allegation made by Sutton's federal counterpart, Brendan Murphy, last month that a wave of infections in north-west Tasmania was the result of an "illegal dinner party" held by health workers in defiance of social distancing rules. Murphy was subsequently forced to retract the claim.

The purpose of these assertions is to downplay the severity of the pandemic in Australia, and the infectiousness of the coronavirus, as part of a bipartisan push to reopen the nation's schools and workplaces. State and federal leaders have plainly stated that this will result in an increase in transmission of the

coronavirus, but have said that it is necessary to "reopen the economy" in the interests of corporate profit-making.

The Fawkner McDonald's was reopened on May 13, staffed by employees from other McDonald's locations. Despite public assurances from the company and DHHS that the outlet was safe after deep cleaning, these workers have been told by head office that they can no longer accept shifts at their regular stores.

The Craigieburn McDonald's was closed on May 15 and its 223 employees were forced to self-isolate after a worker tested positive. The Craigieburn staff member is a relative of one of the Fawkner workers.

About 200 workers who were possibly exposed at the twelve locations have now been told to self-isolate for 14 days and will only be allowed to return to work after presenting a negative COVID-19 test. In total, around 1,000 workers are employed at the affected outlets, meaning hundreds more will miss several days of work while the stores are closed for "deep cleaning."

The company says full- and part-time staff will be paid for their rostered shifts while they are self-isolating, but 79.3 percent of McDonald's workers are employed as casuals and will not be paid while they are unable to work.

While McDonald's Australia claims it has put in place social distancing and hygiene practices, workers have taken to social media to report that cleaning products and hand sanitiser provided by the company are inadequate to prevent transmission of the coronavirus.

At the same time, the company is intensifying its attacks on workers' wages and conditions.

The Fair Work Commission (FWC) ruled on Tuesday to allow a move by McDonald's to modify the Fast Food Industry Award, enabling employers to reduce

workers' hours, and eliminating overtime penalties. The company's application was developed in direct collaboration with the Shop Distributive and Allied Employees' Association (SDA) and the Australian Council of Trade Unions.

Under the modified award, part-time workers are guaranteed only eight hours of work per week with no certainty as to when they will be rostered to work. This essentially reduces them to the status of casual workers, but at a lower hourly rate.

The SDA has for years worked hand-in-hand with McDonald's management in maintaining some of the worst pay and conditions in the country. Prior to adopting the award in December 2019, workers at the company were covered by an enterprise agreement, negotiated by the union, that denied them penalty rates or casual loading.

The latest changes, which apply not just to McDonald's employees, but to all 214,000 workers under the award, also allow employers to compel staff to take annual leave while business is slow.

Under the 2019 agreement, full-time "Level 3" employees with managerial responsibilities earn 9 percent less than two-thirds of median full-time earnings, the benchmark used by the Fair Work Commission to determine who is "low paid."

Casual workers in the fast food industry earn between \$26.76 and \$29.16 per hour, while junior workers in the fast food industry earn as little as \$8.56 per hour.

The wage levels consign workers to poverty and housing stress. After decades of union-enforced cuts to full-time jobs, up to half of all young people are compelled to work in such precarious, casual and low-paid employment.

The McDonald's outbreak is one of several ongoing COVID-19 clusters in Victoria. In recent days positive tests have been returned in connection with Cedar Meats and Sunshine Hospital. Four aged care facilities in the state are on lockdown after residents tested positive for the coronavirus.

The Cedar Meats abattoir began to reopen on Monday with limited staff. According to Victorian Deputy Chief Health Officer Annaliese van Diemen, "the only workers going back are those who are clear of COVID-19 and we know are no longer susceptible."

In fact, there is not yet broad scientific consensus that reinfection is impossible, and the World Health

Organization has cautioned against this strategy.

Across the state border in New South Wales, a 93-year-old resident at Newmarch House died on Tuesday, marking 100 COVID-19 deaths in Australia. With 19 casualties, the western Sydney aged care facility outbreak is now the country's second-most lethal, behind the Ruby Princess cruise ship.

The attacks on McDonald's workers are part of a broader onslaught by the ruling elite. Major corporations are utilising the pandemic as the pretext for implementing longstanding plans to further casualise the workforce and remove any, minimal imposts on profits.

The federal court ruled on Monday that 20,000 Qantas workers will not be allowed to take sick leave because they have been stood down by the company and are not working. Instead they must rely on their annual leave, long-service leave, or the minimum-wage level JobKeeper payment.

Justice Geoffrey Flick was unmoved by the testimony of a long-standing Qantas worker battling cancer or a baggage handler waiting for a triple heart bypass after 35 years' service for the company.

Flick said: "If there is no work available to be performed by the employee, there is no income and no protection against that which has not been lost."

At least 60 Qantas Group workers have been infected with COVID-19 during the pandemic, including a cluster of 34 in Adelaide. The federal court ruling means the company does not have to pay the workers sick leave, despite the fact that most of them contracted the virus while they were on the job.



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