

# Australian coronavirus surge hits workplaces, factories

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The surge in coronavirus infections in the Australian state of Victoria has affected multiple workplaces, including meatworks, warehouses, factories, and retail outlets, in addition to schools, aged care facilities and hospitals.

Yesterday, Victorian state Labor premier Daniel Andrews reported that some 80 percent of all COVID-19 transmissions in the last two months have taken place within workplaces.

Today and yesterday, the state registered four more coronavirus deaths and another 638 new cases, with the vast majority of these classified as “under investigation,” meaning that authorities have no idea how and where people became infected. More than 1,500 coronavirus infections are under investigation in Victoria, indicating community transmission rates that are spiralling out of control.

The workplace transmission figures further expose the federal and state governments’ response to the pandemic. Like their counterparts in the US and internationally, Labor and Liberal political leaders have prioritised the demands of big business and finance capital over public health and safety.

The so-called national cabinet of federal and state ministers rejected in April a strategy aimed at eradicating coronavirus through strict lockdown measures, instead opting to allow a supposedly “safe” level of viral infection in order to open up the economy as quickly as possible.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison declared that everyone with a job was an “essential worker.” Likewise in Victoria, as infections surged this month, the Labor government instituted lockdown measures that limited individuals’ movements and prohibited family and social gatherings, but did nothing to restrict the operations of non-essential business activities.

Schools have been kept open, with thousands of teachers forced to continue working there even when their students are remote learning from their homes (see: “Anger grows as Australian state Labor government sends teachers and senior students back to school in Melbourne”).

Throughout the pandemic, millions of workers who are

unable to work from home on computer-based tasks have been forced to continue as usual in their workplaces.

In Victoria, schools, nursing homes and hospitals have been hard hit. Most of the clusters have formed in the working-class northern and western suburbs of Melbourne. The biggest school cluster is at Al-Taqwa College in Truganina, with 169 people contracting the virus. Thirty nursing homes for the elderly are now in lockdown, including Menarock Aged Care in Essendon and Estia Aged Care in Ardeer, both with 38 cases.

The dangerous situation in nursing homes has emerged in part because of the highly exploitative working conditions that nurses and care workers are subjected to. The workforce mostly comprises immigrant women who have no job security or sick pay provisions, and often work multiple jobs across numerous nursing homes. As a result, the workers can act as inadvertent super spreaders of COVID-19.

The state Labor government has sought to blame casual employees for the rise in infections, attributing this in part to people attending work despite having cold or flu symptoms. This is a cynical attempt to scapegoat the most vulnerable layers of the working class, diverting attention from the real cause of the worsening pandemic, the grossly inadequate and incompetent response from every level of government.

Multiple hospitals and health clinics are also affected by new coronavirus infections, with Northern Hospital in Epping the worst hit with a cluster of 21 cases.

Other workplaces now affected include legal firm HWL Ebsworth lawyers with six cases, the Goodman Fielder Pampas pastry factory in West Footscray with 12 cases and the LaManna supermarket in Essendon with a cluster of 16 infections. The Nestlé factory in the northern suburb of Campbellfield was closed for cleaning after one worker tested positive last week.

Major supermarket chain Woolworths has four confirmed cases at their warehouse in Mulgrave. The grocery giant refused to immediately close down the facility for a full clean. Workers were not told of the infections while they were asked to work overtime shifts to cover the places of

those affected or forced to self-isolate due to proximity to the infected employees. According to NCA Newswire, several angry full-time workers refused to turn up to their shifts in protest.

The biggest workplace outbreak to date is at the Cedar Meats abattoir, where a cluster of 111 cases in April and May made up of 67 workers and 44 close contacts was mismanaged by the company and state health authorities.

Workers were not warned as soon as cases were diagnosed and critical days passed before the facility was shut down on May 1 to bring the outbreak under control. Initially the government refused to publicly name the company as the cluster source, preventing workers and their contacts from taking precautionary measures.

Internationally, meat-processing facilities have been particularly affected by the coronavirus as the work involves hundreds of workers on production lines with circulating cooled air where it is often impossible to socially distance and difficult to wash hands or change face masks regularly.

The *World Socialist Web Site* reported on the outbreak at the Tönnies abattoir in Rheda-Wiedenbrück in Germany, where of 1,050 initial test results, 730 were positive for COVID-19. On July 7, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported 16,233 cases of COVID-19 at 239 meat and poultry facilities in the US, with 86 worker deaths.

Despite these experiences, no precautionary closures of Melbourne meat works were mandated and basic safety measures, such as regular coronavirus testing for workers, not put in place.

There are now major clusters in the western suburbs of Melbourne. The JBS abattoir in Brooklyn is one of ten Australian sites operated by Brazilian-based JBS, the biggest meat producing corporation in the world. There are 35 cases at JBS Brooklyn, and the plant was forced to close last Tuesday. Many of the 1,230 JBS employees are casual workers who will receive no wages while the plant is closed.

In the neighbouring suburb of Tottenham, the Somerville Retail Services (SRS) meat packaging plant has an even bigger cluster, currently at 53 cases. SRS supplies shelf-ready meat to the Coles supermarket chain and employs hundreds of workers. SRS has also been closed. At Colac, in rural western Victoria, six meat workers at the Australian Lamb Company have tested positive.

One meat worker in Melbourne told the *World Socialist Web Site*: “I’m very worried about the disease as I have two elderly parents at home, and ten children in my extended family. What happened at Cedar Meats was terrible—the company clearly didn’t do the right thing.”

The trade unions have collaborated with business and the federal and state governments, while doing nothing to ensure the safety of workers.

The Australasian Meat Industry Employees Union (AMIEU) boasted on its website: “The AMIEU has been keeping a close watch on the pandemic coronavirus, COVID-19, all around the world. [...] There are, however, significant differences between the processes in the USA and many workplaces in Australia. One major difference is that the AMIEU has fought for many years for physical distancing between workers. This [is] not only necessary for infection control, but also reduces the risk of lacerations.”

The latest outbreaks expose this union lie that Australian meat workers’ conditions are significantly different and more safe than those of their fellow workers internationally.

Most meat workers are employed as casuals through labour hire companies. The conditions workers face are the product of decades of enterprise bargaining and productivity agreements that the unions have been party to.

At the JBS plant, for example, in 2010 the National Union of Workers with the assistance of the Australian Council of Trade Unions sold out a six-week struggle against a management lockout of 140 cold storage workers, imposing the elimination of the eight-hour day and reduced weekend penalty rates.

Workers in every affected industry need to organise to defend their safety. The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) has urged the formation of rank-and-file action committees in every school, factory, office, university and workplace, independent of the unions.

These committees, democratically controlled by workers themselves should formulate, oversee and enforce safety and workplace standards. Where conditions are violated, there must be a stoppage of work. We urge all workers to contact the SEP and develop a discussion on these necessary initiatives.



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