

Working-class opposition emerging amid Australia's COVID-19 surge

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As Australia's surge in coronavirus deaths and infections continues, opposition from the working-class is emerging to the subordination of health and safety to the profit demands of the corporate elite.

This morning, 45 workers held an impromptu meeting outside the JBS meatworks in Brooklyn, a working class suburb in Melbourne's west. They resolved that they would not return to the job until their safety concerns were addressed.

The meat works' cold-store operations had been set to resume today, following two weeks of reduced production. The company had been forced to temporarily scale back its operations, after a cluster of infections at the facility resulted in some 71 confirmed cases.

The courageous walkout by the workers is a blow to the attempt to force them back into the plant. Social distancing and other basic precautions are difficult to impossible throughout the meat production industry. The stoppage also threatens to disrupt JBS' plans to push another cohort of employees back on the job this Wednesday.

The workers have set an example that will undoubtedly be followed with keen interest by their colleagues at abattoirs across Victoria and nationally. In Melbourne, at least three meat works have been the scene of mass infections, while outbreaks have occurred at Victorian regional facilities in Colac near Geelong, and in Castlemaine.

In an indication of broader opposition to the criminally-negligent official response to the pandemic, the Australian Principals' Federation issued a demand yesterday for an immediate end to classroom teaching and a return to online learning "for all students in metro Melbourne and Mitchell Shire."

The call was made after another ten schools were forced to close in Melbourne on Monday, following the detection of COVID-19 cases among students and educators. At least 58 schools have been shuttered in the week-and-a-half since the Victorian state Labor government imposed a return to in-person teaching at the beginning of Term Three.

The closures have exposed the lying claims by governments across the country that the dangers posed by the coronavirus stopped at the school gate. In reality, medical experts are now virtually unanimous that the older cohort of students that have

returned to Victorian schools are as likely to contract and transmit the disease as any other demographic.

Julie Podbury, president of the Australian Principals' Federation, told the *Age* that the response of the Victorian Department of Health and Human Services to the wave of school infections had been "staggeringly poor." Her members had been left "waiting for days" for information about contact-tracing and closures after cases were confirmed.

The Principals' Federation statement is all the more striking, given that the organisation has previously done nothing to oppose the dangerous school reopenings. Like the Australian Education Union, it has collaborated closely with the government and has opposed any mobilisation of educators in defence of their basic rights, including to health and safety.

That the federation has now spoken out expresses the scale of the crisis in schools and a groundswell of anger among rank-and-file teachers, principals and parents.

The developing opposition is an indictment of the state and federal authorities that have created the conditions for the resurgence of COVID-19 by prematurely lifting restrictions at the behest of the corporate and financial elite.

In Victoria, it is two-and-a-half weeks since the Labor government introduced a limited lockdown across Melbourne, as transmission was already spiraling out of control. After more than 14 days, the estimated timeframe for COVID-19 incubation, it is clear that the restrictions have failed to halt the rise in case numbers.

As the actions of the JBS meat workers and the anger among teachers make clear, the "lockdown" is a sham. It restricts individual movements and social gatherings, violations of which are punishable by hefty fines, but does not affect the operations of most large businesses and schools.

Victorian Labor Premier Daniel Andrews responded to the principals' demands with barely-concealed contempt. The closure of schools would "not be a proportionate response" to dozens of minors and teachers contracting a potentially deadly disease, Andrews said.

Teachers were "doing a magnificent job," the premier declared, and the "focus" needed to be on "deep cleaning" schools where cases emerge. In other words, the Labor government is decreeing that educators, parents and children

will continue to be infected.

As industry professionals have noted, moreover, “deep cleaning,” while conjuring up images of hazmat suits and equipment worthy of a “Crime Scene Investigation” episode, is a mythical concept when it comes to schools. On the ground, cleaners are low-paid casuals who have complained throughout the pandemic that they are not given the time to clean properly, nor do they have appropriate cleaning products or enough gloves, sanitiser and other basic hygiene products.

The government’s determination for the schools to remain open, in defiance of science and public health, flows from the same corporate considerations that underpin the entire “reopening of the economy.” Having students in classrooms is viewed as a crucial precondition for forcing their parents back to their places of employment, so that profits can be pumped out of their labour.

For the same reason, workplace closures are not even up for discussion, despite the fact that they account for 80 percent of infections since May.

Instead, ordinary people are being blamed. Without presenting a shred of evidence, Andrews has asserted that the spread is the result of workers going to their jobs when they have mild symptoms. As even he has been compelled to acknowledge, to the extent that this is taking place it is the outcome of the casualisation of the workforce and the fact that most people cannot afford to miss even a single shift.

The official response has created a catastrophe. Everyday there are warnings that Victoria’s hospitals could be overwhelmed, with hundreds of doctors and nurses already infected. There are more than 81 aged-care facilities in the state with confirmed cases, meaning that the death toll will rise rapidly over the coming days.

The scale of the crisis was underscored by the announcement yesterday of 532 Victorian infections, the largest number since the pandemic began. Six more deaths were reported, following ten on Sunday.

Andrews and Victorian health authorities nevertheless proclaimed that they were “cautiously confident” that the height of infections had been reached. Today’s tally of 384 cases was welcomed as a reduction on yesterday’s figure.

This continues a pantomime that has played out over the past month. Record daily increases have repeatedly been described as “peaks,” only to be surpassed days later, while marginally lower tallies are declared to be evidence of progress.

For weeks, the authorities have been suggesting that the reproduction rate of the virus is stable or declining, even though the number of infections is increasing. No serious effort has been made to explain this arithmetical anomaly.

The Panglossian optimism is an exercise in public deception. Every day, the majority of cases are reported as being “under investigation,” meaning that the authorities have no idea about the source of infection. Testing is again being restricted for those without symptoms, and six months into the crisis, the

state is short of hundreds of required contact tracers.

The real situation was indicated by public health expert Dr. Norman Swan. On the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s “7:30” program last night, he reviewed international research showing that for every confirmed case, there were often between five and ten that went undetected. In other words, it is possible that thousands of people are contracting the virus in Victoria every day.

The official stance is aimed at staving off calls for more stringent lockdown measures that would impact on business.

This morning, Associate Professor Julian Rait, president of the Victorian branch of the Australian Medical Association, disputed claims that the existing lockdown had “flattened the curve.” He advocated a “new model” that would involve the closure of “pretty much all businesses other than pharmacies, medical clinics, grocery stores, petrol stations” and the curtailment of retail shopping.

Rait called for an effort to eradicate community transmission, a strategy that has been rejected by all governments because its “cost” would be too great. In New South Wales, where daily infections are consistently in the double digits, after local transmission of the virus was all but eliminated last month, the Liberal government has ruled out even limited lockdown measures.

The experiences of the past six months demonstrate that implementing the measures demanded by science and medical experts requires the political mobilisation of the working class. This can only go forward through a rebellion against the unions, which function as an industrial police force of the corporations and governments.

Meat workers should establish rank-and-file committees, completely independent of the unions. These would be tasked with enforcing safety measures, breaking the isolation imposed by the unions and turning out to other sections of the working class.

Above all, the crisis has demonstrated that the defence of the social rights of the workers is incompatible with private ownership of society’s resources. The meat works, along with the banks and major corporations, must be placed under public ownership and democratic workers control. That means the fight for a workers government and socialism.



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