

Australian meatworks emerge as centres of COVID-19

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Following a stoppage by meat workers at a JBS meat plant in Melbourne last week, Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews on Monday announced limited coronavirus safety measures in abattoirs and the meat industry, as part of wider partial “state of disaster” lockdown measures.

Meat production in the Australian state is meant to be cut by one-third and workers in the meat plants are supposed to be provided with health worker-level personal protective equipment, such as gloves, gowns, masks and shields.

Andrews boasted of the “most stringent safety protocols that have ever been put in place, in any industrial setting.” In reality, the state Labor Party government’s long overdue and still inadequate measures amount to a devastating exposure of its pro-business regime. For six months, as the pandemic raged around the world and in Australia, meat workers were endangered while little was done to protect their safety.

As throughout the economy, the priority of state, territory and federal governments, Labor and Liberal-National, has been to protect corporate profits ahead of workers’ lives, safety and public health.

The largest Victorian cluster, in the first wave of the virus that began in March, was at a Cedar Meats facility in the Melbourne suburb of Brooklyn. The first case was identified inside the facility on April 24, and another two days later. By late May, 111 cases were linked to Cedar Meats.

For weeks after the virus began circulating in the plant management insisted there was no issue. Workers who complained were told they were spreading baseless “rumours.” Even after confirmed infections were detected, some workers were compelled to remain on the line.

Andrews initially refused to publicly name the

company or indicate where the cluster was located. This was clearly aimed at preventing any commercial damage to the business, regardless of the public health implications, and ensuring that it could resume full operations as quickly as possible.

Only after opposition developed, including from meat workers, was it disclosed publicly that Cedar Meats was the facility.

Clusters have since emerged at a host of meatworks. In Melbourne, they include Somerville Retail Services in Tottenham, with 129 cases so far, Bertocchi Smallgoods in Thomastown, where 148 infections have been detected, and Don KR in Castlemaine, where 10 workers have been struck down. Five cases have been confirmed at Ingham’s Foodservice in Thomastown, with infections also detected at Pacific Meats in the same suburb.

Facilities in Victorian regional areas have been hit, with 77 workers affected at an Australian Lamb plant in Colac.

The Colac outbreak further exposed the exploitation of a workforce dominated by unskilled non-English-speaking migrants and refugees who are forced to live on insecure subsistence wages. The local government council complained of the difficulty of finding appropriate social isolation housing for meat workers who had been previously forced by their circumstances to have as many as 50 people crammed into one house.

JBS is one of the largest global food processing companies. Its abattoir in Brooklyn, Melbourne, is the biggest in Victoria, employing in excess of 1,500 people. There have been at least 86 COVID-19 cases there.

Last week, 45 cold storage workers at the plant refused to begin work, holding a stop work meeting to demand safe working conditions. Their demands

included intensive site cleaning, screening of employees, the supply of adequate face masks and safe social distancing measures. They also protested JBS's previous deductions of annual leave entitlements without consent, and refusal to pay wages for those without leave entitlements, during temporary plant closures.

One worker who reportedly had his leave deducted without authorisation had been saving it to assist with the care of his baby, who his partner was due to deliver through caesarean section.

The meat industry is among the most vulnerable of industries internationally. Benjamin Cowie, an infectious disease expert for the Peter Doherty Institute for Infection and Immunity in Melbourne, told the *Guardian* that long shifts and workers forced to be in close proximity of one another were risk factors. He added: "Certainly, we know that the coronavirus that causes COVID-19 is more stable in cold conditions."

At least 20 percent of all American meat workers have already been infected. In Germany, an outbreak at the Toennies Slaughterhouse in Rheda-Wiedenbrueck affected more than 650 employees, with 7,000 others forced into isolation. A study conducted by the Helmholtz Centre for Infection Research concluded that inadequately circulated chilled air, combined with close proximity and strenuous working conditions, meant that infected workers could infect others within an 8-metre range.

In Australia, as internationally, the trade unions have functioned as the crucial enforcers of the government-corporate agenda, keeping workers on the job to generate profits.

Australasian Meat Industry Employees Union state secretary Paul Conway opposed the strike action of JBS cold storage workers. "We seem to be managing working through the issues, but it [the stop work action] will mean it will stop production—our guys won't be able to work either," he said.

Conway heaped praise on JBS management: "I would say, credit where credit is due. They have done what they can—if you are going to have a pocket of workers anywhere, you are going to have problems."

Meat workers throughout Australia need to follow the lead provided by the JBS cold storage workers, developing the immediate and necessary industrial action independently of the trade unions.

The JBS stoppage is part of the growing opposition in the working class to the unsafe conditions they are being forced to endure. The day after the JBS workers took action, 35 workers at the Spotless commercial laundry in South Dandenong, another Melbourne suburb, refused to turn up for their shifts, following an outbreak of COVID-19 at the facility.

This Monday, about 240 warehouse workers at the Woolworths Liquor Distribution Centre in Laverton, western Melbourne, took strike action. A worker had tested positive on Friday, but the grocery corporate giant refused to close the warehouse.

Workers need to form rank and file safety and action committees to establish the widest unity of workers throughout the meat and other basic industries, connecting the fight for basic health and safety precautions to the global struggle of the working class.

This development will mean a direct conflict with both the state Labor government in Victoria and the federal Liberal-National government of Prime Minister Scott Morrison. Workers should contact the Socialist Equality Party and *World Socialist Web Site* to discuss the necessary initiatives to take this struggle forward.

The author recommends:

Victoria's COVID-19 catastrophe: An indictment of Australian governments and capitalism
[5 August 2020]

Amid COVID-19 "disaster," Australian state government announces limited workplace closures
[4 August 2020]

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