

Australian Kmart warehouse workers in Melbourne strike over COVID-19 safety

Paul Bartizan
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Workers at a Kmart warehouse distribution centre in the western Melbourne suburb of Truganina walked off the job on Friday after management failed to reveal details about a COVID-19 outbreak at the site.

Management refused to provide information about positive test results, leaving workers in the dark about the potential danger they faced.

The giant warehouse, where hundreds of people work, supplies Kmart stores across the southern states of Victoria, Tasmania and South Australia and is operated by logistics company Toll.

The COVID-19 positive workers were employed by labour hire company, Tusk Group. According to the *Age* newspaper, three workers were advised to self-isolate as they were suspected of being in close proximity to someone who last worked on July 31 and was found to be positive for COVID-19 last Wednesday.

After closure for cleaning on Thursday afternoon, the warehouse restarted operations on Friday. Workers then staged a walkout and their health and safety representatives issued a stop work notice.

The United Workers Union (UWU) reported that the COVID-19 positive worker was the second case at the warehouse. UWU Logistics Director Matt Toner said: “Contact tracing at the site has been disturbingly inadequate. Only three other workers have been told by Toll to self-isolate. They came to this decision after reviewing CCTV footage and asking the employee who he remembers talking to.”

Six names appeared on a list designated COVID-19 positive, but management refused to provide details of when and where these workers had been on site.

According to the UWU: “Fifty workers complied with the stop work—and were threatened by Toll as they did so. Toll announced over the loudspeaker that

workers complying with the stop work would be disciplined ... management stood in the exits and said the workers would be disciplined and not paid if they left.”

This corporate intimidation comes after similar threats against other groups of workers taking action to defend themselves against the coronavirus pandemic. Last week, laundry workers at Spotless in Dandenong South went on strike in protest against being made to wash soiled hospital linen without adequate protections. The company rushed to the Fair Work industrial relations court in an attempt to force them back to the plant.

Warehouses, like meatworks and nursing homes, have become dangerous places for workers in this pandemic. Breakneck picking quotas are imposed on warehouse workers, making safe work practices often impossible. Toll management claimed they were staggering shift changes, temperature testing employees and supplying masks and hand sanitiser, but the eruption of numerous infections in the industry demonstrate the ineffectiveness of the limited measures put in place.

A cluster of 45 coronavirus cases has occurred at the Linfox distribution centre in Truganina, just 4 kilometres from the Kmart warehouse. At the similarly nearby Woolworths Liquor distribution centre in Laverton North, 240 workers refused to work last Monday morning after hearing that a co-worker had tested positive to COVID-19 three days earlier.

There was another COVID-19 cluster of 60 workers at the Woolworths Mulgrave distribution centre, and up to 60 employees at other Woolworths' facilities.

Resistance to the dangerous conditions is expanding. This morning, more than 60 workers at a Mitre-10 facility in the Melbourne suburb of Derrimut began

strike action after a worker tested positive on Monday. According to the union, Mitre-10 has been compelled to close two warehouses at the site and send all workers home with pay for testing.

Melbourne is now subject to a “Stage 4” lockdown and the rest of Victoria has “Stage 3” restrictions imposed. Daily numbers of new cases in Victoria are fluctuating around three to four hundred. Sustained community transmission with no known source forced the government to act to impose restrictions including a nightly curfew enforced by police and army personnel. Today a record 19 deaths from the virus were announced in Victoria, following yesterday's previous high of 17.

Despite the alarming situation, unnecessary warehouse operations have been permitted to continue. The only restriction imposed by the state Labor government is that staff numbers are meant to be reduced by one-third of their usual levels.

Many of the largest warehouses in Melbourne—employing thousands of workers, many of them casuals—are located in the municipality of Wyndham. It has the highest number of COVID-19 cases of any local government area in Australia, a total of 1,600 cases, of which 910 are currently active.

The high proportion of casuals employed through labour hire companies like the Tusk Group at the Kmart warehouse means that workers can spend a day or two at one site then the next day at another warehouse, thereby increasing the risk of spreading the virus.

Kmart stores are closed in Melbourne, reflecting their non-essential character, but the government still allows the corporation to operate its warehouse to supply online sales and interstate and regional stores that are not closed. These stores could be supplied from other locations where there are no infections, but the overriding concern of the company and the government is not workers' health but continued profit making.

Kmart is owned by Australia's largest conglomerate, Wesfarmers, which runs retail, chemicals and coal mining operations and employs 105,000 people. It had a 2019 net profit, after tax, of \$1.9 billion. As well as its highly profitable 234 Kmart stores across Australia and New Zealand, Wesfarmers owns Bunnings, Officeworks and Target, among other businesses.

The trade unions, including the UWU, are complicit in the government-corporate drive to allow certain non-

essential industries, including warehouses, to continue operations amid the pandemic. No united action of all warehouse workers has been organised to address unsafe conditions and halt punitive threats by corporate management.

Warehouse and other workers need to organise rank and file safety committees, independently of the trade union bureaucracy, and develop the widest discussion within the working class on the necessary measures to save workers' lives, including strike action. A safe workplace ought to be a basic social right, but amid the pandemic this can only be recognised through an industrial and political struggle against the corporations and their political servants.



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