

Socialist Equality Party (Australia) holds online health workers' forum

Our reporter
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The Socialist Equality Party (Australia) held a successful online forum on September 19 to discuss the COVID-19 pandemic, the crisis of capitalism and the way forward for health workers. Over 50 people participated from across Australia, including nurses, doctors, aged care workers and disability workers.

The meeting was held as Australian governments, urged on by the corporate media, intensify their moves toward a full “return to work,” in defiance of advice by medical experts and warnings by health workers that they are still being denied adequate personal protective equipment (PPE).

The number of health workers in Victoria, the national epicentre of Australia’s COVID-19 infections, continues to climb. Health worker infections accounted for about 20 percent of new COVID-19 cases between July and August, with almost half of these among aged care employees.

Gary Alvernia, a junior doctor, SEP national committee member and writer for the *World Socialist Web Site*, gave the opening report to the forum. He highlighted the rapid spread of the coronavirus pandemic around the world and the criminal response of governments internationally. The massive, trillion-dollar corporate bailout of Wall Street, which vastly exceeded the corporate handouts of 2008, was contrasted with the response of governments throughout the world to the threat of the pandemic towards lives and livelihoods.

“Even as the virus spread, governments and health authorities resisted the most elementary measures of quarantine and testing, allowing clusters of infections to rapidly grow from tens, hundreds, to thousands before taking any action,” he said.

Julia Thomas, a member of the Socialist Equality Party national committee, reported on the situation in Australia and the attacks on health workers and the healthcare system. She also outlined the SEP’s fight for a socialist perspective and the necessity for workers to build rank-and-file safety committees in workplaces to “enforce health and safety conditions in workplaces and hospitals and to organise resistance, including strike actions, against unsafe conditions

and in defence of jobs, wages and conditions.”

Tom Peters, a leading member of the Socialist Equality Group in New Zealand, also spoke. “In New Zealand, just as in Australia, the United States and everywhere else, governments have given tens of billions of dollars—trillions of dollars on a world scale—to bail out big business and the banks... and healthcare workers are being told there’s not enough money for them,” he said.

Erika, a teacher and member of the Committee for Public Education, emphasised the parallel between the conditions that teachers and health workers face and emphasised that, “This situation has been created by the unions, whether the healthcare unions or the teacher unions... unions today, under capitalism, act as a police force against workers’ demands.”

In a lively Q&A session, attendees asked many questions, including what a socialist response to the pandemic would look like. In the chat box, several health workers described their experiences during the pandemic.

One worker wrote, “While there are no or limited lockdowns and the virus circulates in the community, residents in nursing homes and disability homes are locked down without access to family and social supports.

“There is virtually no training in the disability sector. There is plenty of direction in my disability service about infection control, but due to limited training and supervision, and the use of casual staff employed through agencies, it is probably only a matter of time before there is an outbreak.”

Another commented, “I work in a cancer hospital in Melbourne... we have all been temperature checked upon entry for months, offered plenty of PPE and plenty of education as to how to use it. As a result, we have had only one infected patient, who infected two staff, and the outbreak was contained at that point...”

“Contrast this with the aged care home St Basil’s, where two staff are paid \$22 per hour to attend to the needs of 150 residents! Numerous residents were dying of dehydration, i.e., neglect. My husband is a funeral director and has been burying these poor elderly sacrificial lambs for weeks. It’s been appalling.”

After the forum, the *World Socialist Web Site* interviewed other participants.

A young nurse from Melbourne said: “I thought the meeting was very educational. It was good to hear the information. I don’t think the Australian government took coronavirus very seriously from the beginning. There was too much misinformation, that it was just like the flu, that it would only affect old people or those with suppressed immune systems. Nobody was told from the beginning what it would mean.

“As health workers, you sign up to put yourself in the position, but we’re not martyrs, we should be given the equipment to keep safe and the government should take it more seriously. I want to be a nurse and help people, but I don’t want to lose my life. I don’t want to make my family sick. Look at what is happening in aged care. They’ve got the money, but they make excuses as to why they don’t provide PPE. The patients are not protected.

“It was good that the meeting discussed the unions, and that they didn’t do much to help health workers. I had heard good things about the ANMF [Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation] but it’s not looked at as a political thing. A lot of nurses just see it as insurance, but hearing how the unions weren’t involved is disappointing.

“I think rank-and-file safety committees are a good idea. I found that particularly interesting, because I wish the union would have done something more. If our unions are not doing anything then we have to help ourselves as workers. Management is always on the side of the big people; doesn’t back the actual worker.

“When I hear terms like ‘China virus’ from Trump it’s just fear-mongering towards China for his own agenda. I hate it when things like that come out.

It’s us, the workers out there working every day, who don’t get to work from home, and then we get the blame for the transmissions that are happening. As for the United States, the way the workers got only \$1,200 to survive—I’ve got no words for that. The system doesn’t work for us—we don’t win at the end of the day and it’s our lives.”

An aged care nurse in Melbourne, who participated in the meeting with her husband, had contracted COVID-19 at her workplace. Her husband spoke on her behalf:

“Around the world the governments are all the same—there’s just official indifference about COVID-19—but around the world health workers were not ready to face the situation because they were not trained for it. In Australia, health workers were asked to work with inadequate training,” he said.

“My wife was working in two units in the facility, and doesn’t know which one she got infected from. The first had two people infected, they weren’t separated, then 20 were

infected, then 20 out of a total of 28. She was transferred to where there were two more infected, but they were separated. However, 13 staff became infected and the union did nothing. We telephoned the union, but got no support at all. They sent out a letter and a mask.

“Rank-and-file committees are a good idea, if it is possible. We have no confidence in the unions and we’re only members because there is nothing else to do.

“What [former Prime Minister] Tony Abbott said is just like a plan to get rid of the old people. They put money before lives. All the governments in the world would like a deliberate plan to get rid of all the old people.”

A worker in Western Australia commented that the SEP forum was important because people “don’t realise how bad it can probably get.”

Having been injured at work, she said, “I totally agree with rank-and-file safety committees. I think we should get rid of the unions altogether because they are useless. They work for management more than for the workers, their members.

“The union members are too scared to bring the union into work but still pay their dues. I’ve heard a lot of people have resigned from the union.

“My work colleagues feel that if we don’t do it, who is going to look after the elderly? They care for the residents, but management don’t care at all. The workers form a friendship with a lot of the residents. The carers go flat out. Why can’t the government put more money into the aged? Why not more money for health?”



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