

COVID-19 intensifies the class struggle in Australia

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9 May 2021

Cheryl Crisp is the national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party (Australia). She was a founding member of the Socialist Labour League, the forerunner of the SEP, in 1972, and has played a leading role in the Trotskyist movement in Australia for more than four decades. She delivered these remarks to the 2021 International May Day Online Rally held by the WSWs and the ICFI on May 1.

On behalf of the SEP Australia, I would like to welcome listeners throughout the world.

The last year has been one like no other. The spread of COVID-19 has transformed the lives of billions of people. More than three million have died. The events in India, Brazil, the US and Europe highlight that far from the pandemic being under control by the end of 2020, this year has seen an acceleration of its spread, its lethality and the deterioration of the conditions of life of the working class internationally. This was not inevitable, but the outcome of conscious policies of capitalist governments.

Australia and New Zealand have been hailed as countries whose governments defeated the disease. Nothing could be further from the truth. The conservative Morrison Coalition government's approach to the pandemic was no different than any other capitalist government. It enacted lockdowns and quarantining only because of the demands of workers and the fear of wider opposition developing.

The low infection rates in this country could transform overnight. Recent outbreaks in all the mainland capital cities have been a warning of that. The fact is the government's vaccination program is in tatters. Only 5 percent of the population have received their first dose, and no figures have been released on the number fully vaccinated. But the ruling class demands the borders open, both state and national,

despite the unchecked spread of new variant forms of the virus.

This is a government of immense weakness. In January 2020, it confronted the developing pandemic as it was hated by broad sections of the population because of its criminal disinterest in the impact on the population of the worst bushfire crisis in Australia's history in the previous six months. Morrison and his government were not able to deal with a growing emergency in the form of COVID-19.

In fact, one of the first actions of the Morrison government was to establish a National Cabinet made up of federal government representatives and the leaders of all the state and territory governments, the majority of which are Labor Party. This cabinet replaced parliament, which barely met for six months in 2020.

This de facto national unity formation enlisted both Labor and particularly the trade unions, which, under the guise of the pandemic, pledged to work with the government. Sally McManus, the secretary of the ACTU, the peak union body in Australia, collaborated with the government to secure the reversal of the most basic conditions of the working class—penalty rates, standard working hours and pay rates.

Parliament, however, sat long enough to pass four stimulus packages, which resulted in a transfer of more than \$400 billion from the public purse to corporations and big business. This was 10 times more than that issued during the 2008–09 financial crisis. The SEP warned that the stimulus packages would have to be paid back through the increased exploitation of the working class through a deepening and unrelenting assault on the working class. This has been confirmed.

The pandemic has been the occasion for a meteoric rise in the stock markets internationally, and this is no

different here. Australia's billionaires grew in number and wealth. While unemployment and underemployment hit 26 percent of the workforce, levels not seen since the 1930s depression, the wealth of the 10 richest Australians increased by more than 44 percent from 2019 and the number of billionaires rose by 25 percent.

After the government ended the JobKeeper payment at the end of March, total wages decreased by 3.1 percent in the first fortnight, with payroll jobs falling by almost 2 percent. This is just the very beginning of the impact of removing the totally inadequate payment and slashing the poverty-line welfare payments.

But this only intensifies a process which has been underway for decades. The ACTU released a report this week, which is itself an indictment of its own role, outlining the impact of the assault on wages over the past four decades. It said:

“Wage growth ... is now at its lowest levels since record keeping began... If workers' share of GDP had remained at 1970s levels, it would have been \$200 billion higher in 2019, or an extra \$15,000 in additional income, on average, for each and every employed Australian.”

There has been here, as evidenced in many other countries, a fight back by workers against these conditions. This was expressed starkly last November when the Coles supermarket chain, one of the largest corporations in Australia, locked out 350 warehouse workers in the Sydney facility at Smeaton Grange in planning to close down the facility.

This began a 14-week struggle, with the workers voting more than 10 times against the union-company offer. The union refused to organise a strike fund and during the more than three-month lockout, workers were paid around \$200 in total. The union kept the dispute isolated, even from other Coles warehouse workers.

It was only through the *World Socialist Web Site* and the SEP that workers at Coles facilities in multiple states found out about the lockout. The SEP fought for a break from the union and the establishment of independent rank-and-file committees that could coordinate a unified struggle with other sections of workers in Australia and internationally, including the Hunts Point warehouse workers in New York, in struggle.

Everything was thrown at these workers to drive them back to work. And in what was a revealing video appearance, one of the Coles senior managers, Matthew Swindells, announced the extension of the lockout as retaliation for their “no” vote, venting his fury at them and the SEP for fighting against the union betrayal.

Swindells said: “With the ‘no’ vote there is no plan. The only people with an alternative plan is the extreme socialists that have infiltrated this dispute... They are suggesting this wider agenda of taking on big business and the banks. They are pushing the agenda now... These are faceless people who are not even part of the union. In fact they are anti-union people, down on the picket, handing out leaflets.”

In other words, Swindells, one of the top national managers at one of Australia's largest corporations, was defending the United Workers Union (UWU) from socialist criticism. His comments demonstrate that management views the UWU as an essential partner in enforcing its agenda.

Unintentionally, Swindells exposed the union-company alliance against the workers. This conspiracy is being carried out in every workplace in every country. The unions are not workers' organisations. They are the policemen of capitalism against their own members. Outside a complete break with these corporate watchdogs, workers are shackled to the interests of their national ruling class.

This is why the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) is calling for the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees—to provide the mechanism by which workers can fight for their independent interests. Workers can collaborate throughout their industry, country and internationally. Communities can discuss and coordinate their response to the crisis engulfing their neighbourhoods and cities.

This is a fight that must be waged internationally against the system which has created this disaster—capitalism. It is only the ICFI which fights for the socialist transformation of society. I urge you to join this party.



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