

Australian unions demand Sydney COVID-19 lockdown reversal

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Following New South Wales (NSW) Premier Gladys Berejiklian's Saturday morning announcement of stricter lockdown measures in the Greater Sydney region, unions have led the charge for many of these restrictions to be reversed. The campaign by the unions, waged alongside big business, is a stark exposure of the thoroughly corporatised, anti-working-class character of these organisations.

Berejiklian announced that residents of the Fairfield, Canterbury-Bankstown and Liverpool regions—the local government areas (LGAs) at the centre of Sydney's ongoing COVID-19 outbreak—would no longer be permitted to leave their LGA except for work in healthcare or emergency services. In addition, the state premier announced that all “non-critical” construction would be “paused” for two weeks.

The heightened restrictions only came after three weeks of partial “lockdown” measures—with virtually no limits on business—failed to prevent a growing surge in infections which, by Saturday, had caused three deaths and at least 75 hospitalisations from COVID-19. Since the announcement, a further 288 cases have been found in NSW, and two more people have died. There are currently 95 people hospitalised with COVID-19 in the state.

As a result of the late introduction and limited character of the earlier measures, the outbreak has spread across the country and prompted a lockdown in Victoria, where 88 cases have been recorded in the last week, and the re-introduction of COVID-19 restrictions in South Australia.

Without even a pretence of concern for the health or safety of their members, the immediate response of the trade unions covering the impacted industries was to join with business leaders in lobbying the NSW government for exemptions to the public health orders.

The Transport Workers Union (TWU) posted on Facebook at 5:15 p.m. Saturday: “ALL essential transport workers must be automatically exempt from panicked snap restrictions from the NSW Government.” Also, on Saturday, the TWU wrote to the premier demanding “a standing exemption which relieves transport workers from future snap policy changes which would prevent them from doing their jobs.”

On Sunday morning, the TWU proclaimed, “TRANSPORT WORKERS WIN EXEMPTION FROM NSW

GOVERNMENT.” This is what the union regards as a win for workers—being forced back to work under conditions where the Delta variant is completely out of control.

Demonstrating yesterday that it is more concerned with the profit demands of industry than health or science, the union stated: “The TWU are working behind the scenes to prevent the politics of panic infecting the transport industry.”

The Communications Electrical Plumbers Union (CEPU) posted to Facebook on Saturday: “We are currently engaging with Australia Post to understand the impacts of the reviewed public health orders announced by the NSW Government today—on operations and the extent of the ability for members living in affected areas to engage in meaningful work.”

Late Saturday night, the CEPU, having “engaged with Australia Post at the highest levels throughout the day,” told its members: “The NSW Government has now authorised for people working in the freight, logistics, postal, courier or delivery services industries to travel outside the affected LGAs, if required for work purposes.”

The Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) announced on Saturday that it was “currently writing to all maritime employers calling on them to immediately place any affected workers on paid pandemic leave until such time as these restrictions are lifted.”

Any hopes of MUA members that they would have to choose between protection from the pandemic and paying their bills were soon dashed, however. The union announced on Sunday morning: “Maritime Workers Win Exemption from NSW Government. After late afternoon meetings yesterday, your union got agreement to allow Seaport and Ferry workers to be added to ‘Authorised Worker’ list.”

As a result of this union-led campaign, the NSW government released a list on Saturday night detailing exemptions for 35 occupations, reversing virtually all of the heightened restrictions it announced in the morning.

The “pause” on construction was not reversed, prompting an angry response from the Construction Forestry Energy and Mining Union (CFMEU). Union Secretary Darren Greenfield told 2GB Radio: “We’re still angry but we need to start telling this government—everyone in the industry does—that we need to get back up and running.”

Greenfield said this was because, “If this goes past Friday week, the date we’ve got set now, businesses will start to collapse.”

At no point in Saturday’s flurry of communication did any of these unions express a single word of concern for the health and safety of their members. In almost every case, COVID-19 is not even mentioned, as if the heightened restrictions had been announced in an alternate reality in which the global pandemic had not already claimed well over four million lives.

Not one of the unions included in their denunciations of the measures a demand for priority vaccination for their members. Currently less than 14 percent of Australian adults are fully vaccinated against COVID-19, and less than 35 percent have received even one shot.

Instead, the only concern of the unions is to force their members to continue working under dangerous conditions in order to fulfil the profit demands of management. The unions characterise the NSW government’s reversal of restrictions as a win, because it is a win for the layer whose interests they truly represent—big business.

Certainly, workers hearing the announcement of lockdown measures affecting their industries had concerns beyond just the threat of disease. Decades of wage suppression and the destruction of full-time positions in favour of poorly-paid casual and gig-economy jobs without paid leave entitlements—all enforced by the unions—mean two weeks without work will result in serious financial hardship for much of the working class.

The unions are exploiting the desperation of these workers rather than demanding that those affected by the restrictions continue to be paid in full while it is unsafe for them to work. Instead, the unions are promoting the conception that workers’ ability to pay their bills and provide for their families is intimately bound up with the unimpeded profitability of major corporations.

To the extent that Australia’s unions have expressed any demand for financial assistance for lockdown-affected workers, it has been to call for the re-introduction of the JobKeeper wage subsidy. Both Unions NSW and the Australian Council of Trade Unions have vehemently called for the re-introduction of JobKeeper, which last year resulted in billions of dollars being handed over to businesses, many of which increased their profits during the pandemic, and which were under no obligation to retain workers once the payments stopped at the end of March.

Workers should reject these calls for further handouts to big business, which the working class will be forced to “repay” through years of stagnant wages and further cuts to public services. Instead, workers must demand that their wages are paid out of the massively-increased profits accrued by the wealthy elite during the pandemic. Between March and December 2020, the combined net worth of Australian billionaires increased by more than 50 percent.

Throughout the world, the same wealthy layers who have profited during the pandemic are directly responsible for its severity. Their relentless opposition to border closures, capacity restrictions and lockdowns, and the assent of every capitalist government to these demands, has caused millions of unnecessary deaths. The Delta variant that has necessitated the current lockdowns in Sydney and Melbourne is the product of these globally-adopted “herd immunity” policies, which have allowed mass circulation of the coronavirus and the development of this and other mutant strains.

There can be no end to the subordination of workers’ rights—including the most basic, life itself—within the capitalist system. The grotesque and ever-growing riches of the wealthy few, in Australia and internationally, show that there is no shortage of resources to cope with a temporary reduction in productivity to protect lives.

What is required is a fight for a socialist future, in which these resources will be used to meet the social needs of humanity, rather than to further enrich a small elite. The response of Australia’s trade unions to Saturday’s announcement is a stark demonstration that these rotten organisations are diametrically opposed to such a fight. Their role during the pandemic has been to keep production going, whatever the dangers to safety, collaborate in massive government handouts to business, and to suppress strikes and industrial action, while imposing sweeping cuts to jobs, wages and conditions.

Workers must make a conscious break with the trade unions, which serve only as an industrial police force of big business, and form new organisations of struggle, including rank-and-file committees, in their workplaces, schools and neighbourhoods. In the first instance, these committees should demand that health and safety and the preservation of human life are no longer subordinated to the material interests of a wealthy few.



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