

Australian anti-vaccine, extreme right demonstrators target construction industry

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Anti-vaccine and extreme right-wing groups have led violent rallies in Melbourne over the last two days, targeting the building industry and the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU).

On Monday, approximately 400 people rallied outside the CFMEU office in central Melbourne. Prominent fascists were among the crowd, including Avi Yemini and former members of the defunct United Patriots Front. Extreme rightwing social media message groups encouraged people to attend while wearing high-visibility jackets, so as to “blend in” by posturing as construction workers. Members of criminal bikie gangs were also identified. According to several reports, cartons of beer were delivered and distributed. A layer of construction workers were present, though the CFMEU insisted they comprised less than half of those at the protest.

Echoing a rally organised last weekend by the extreme right, the crowd voiced anti-lockdown and anti-vaccine chants, with anti-communist demagoguery also prominent.

CFMEU Victorian state secretary John Setka attempted to address the demonstrators but was shouted down and pelted with bottles and crates. Several windows of the union headquarters were smashed by projectiles, and fistfights broke out between protestors and union officials. Riot police then moved in and dispersed the crowd.

On Monday evening, the state Labor government announced it was shutting down non-essential construction for two weeks, citing the violent rally and the growing spread of COVID-19 infections on building sites.

Yesterday, another anti-lockdown, anti-vax rally was staged in central Melbourne. Larger than Monday’s event, approximately 2,000 people marched through the city and blocked traffic on the West Gate freeway. Journalists were targeted, with one Channel 7 news reporter hit with a bottle and covered in urine. Demonstrators also clashed with heavily-armed riot police, equipped with new “non-lethal” weapons recently purchased by the state government. Police fired rubber pellets, pepper balls, and smoke rounds. There were reportedly 63 arrests.

A significant number of the protestors yesterday appeared to be construction workers. Politically, however, the event was again dominated by the extreme right-wing. Fascist agitators were present, again from the United Patriots Front, as well as individuals claiming to be members of the US-based Proud Boys organisation. Another individual flew large flags featuring former

US President Donald Trump.

The rallies were reactionary events. There is no legitimacy whatsoever to the demand of various fascist, libertarian and conspiracy theory groups for the immediate lifting of the lockdown and other restrictions that are necessary to prevent large scale COVID infection. The virus has killed 4.5 million worldwide, according to the official figures, though the real toll is likely at least twice that. Many more are suffering the effects of long COVID, including chronic fatigue, heart and blood pressure issues, and neurological effects such as debilitating “brain fog.” Daily infections in Melbourne are rapidly rising, and are about to exceed the peak numbers seen during the July-August 2020 wave.

Nor is there any legitimacy to the anti-vaccine campaign, which rests upon irrationalism and conspiracy theorist fear mongering. The development of the COVID-19 vaccine was a triumph of internationally coordinated scientific research, and its rapid adoption by the world’s population is a vital component of the fight to end the pandemic.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* Editorial Board has explained: “Mass vaccination is an elementary requirement of public health and the self-defence of the working class. Even the presentation of the issue as one of ‘vaccine mandates’ is false to the core, since it treats the issue of vaccination as if it is some sort of infringement on ‘personal liberty.’ In fact, no individual has the ‘right’ to infect others and endanger their lives. ... Those who are campaigning against vaccinations by claiming they are an intolerable violation of personal liberty are peddling anarchism and libertarianism, which has nothing in common with the interests of the working class.” (Oppose the right-wing campaign against vaccination!)

The working class in Australia understands many of these issues. Lockdowns and other restrictions have been overwhelmingly supported, even in the face of the criminally inadequate provision by federal and state governments of the necessary income, welfare, and health support measures.

At every stage of the pandemic, the ruling class has had to consider the threat of workers taking action to defend their safety, independently of the trade unions that have collaborated with big business and the governments throughout the pandemic. Teachers, health workers, and warehouse workers are among those who threatened to organise independent industrial action via social media to protect their safety, as federal and state governments attempted to force them into unsafe working places.

Construction workers likewise threatened action. At the beginning of the pandemic, in March and April 2020, hundreds of builders denounced the CFMEU for enforcing continued operations in the building sector, despite escalating COVID infections. A worker wrote on the union's Facebook page, in one of hundreds of critical comments that were quickly censored by the bureaucracy, "Worker dues before health, it's disgusting."

There are about 230,000 construction workers in Victoria, with approximately 30,000 of these members of the CFMEU. Even if most of yesterday's 2,000 demonstrators were construction workers (and this is by no means clear), they represent only a small minority of the workforce.

That this minority has been susceptible to extreme right-wing demagogy on lockdowns and vaccines is primarily due, firstly to the political and media establishment's anti-lockdown "reopening" campaign, and, secondly to the role played by the CFMEU and the trade unions.

On the first issue, Australian state governments, Labor and Liberal, are rapidly moving to permanently junk lockdowns and other health and safety measures, in order to promote economic activity and the greater accumulation of corporate profits. With regard to this agenda, there are no substantive differences between the political establishment and the fascists. Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews last weekend bluntly explained that the "reopening" would push the hospital system to the brink of collapse, while insisting that the population had to accept that, "there will be pain, it will be challenging [but] we have to normalise this."

On the second issue, the CFMEU has for decades collaborated with governments and building corporations, delivering industrial "peace" in return for the bureaucracy being given a privileged place within the industry, including through the operation of profitable "training organisations" and "charities." Melbourne, Sydney, and other major cities have experienced major construction booms in the last 20 years, yet there has not been a single significant strike.

The priorities of the corporatist, pro-business "union" have been demonstrated throughout the pandemic. Rather than protecting the safety of building workers by fighting for the suspension of all non-essential construction while there is COVID-19 circulating in the population, with 100 percent income support for all affected workers, the bureaucracy has worked hand in hand with the construction companies and the state government to maintain operations and keep profits flowing.

Tensions have been building for weeks within the industry. Most sites were only permitted to operate at 25 percent capacity, leaving large numbers of construction workers out of work and dependent on the government's grossly inadequate \$750 weekly emergency payment. This is a substantial pay cut for most building workers.

Those remaining on construction sites had their working conditions arbitrarily eroded. The state government last week responded to escalating COVID infections on building sites, not by stepping up inspection and enforcement safety mechanisms against reckless corporate operators—nor by suspending non-essential production—but rather by shutting down workers' lunch and tea rooms. These rooms were only won through the bitter struggles of

previous generations of construction workers, and their closure forced workers to take their breaks outside in the cold and wet.

Widespread anger erupted among construction workers, directed against both the government and the CFMEU, which only complained that it would have appreciated better "consultation." Several dozen workers staged a protest in the city and several inner suburbs on Friday, setting up tables and chairs across roads and blocking traffic and public transport while they took their lunch break. Workers have also expressed anger over the union's offer to the government to have builders work 6-hour days without pause, at 8 hours pay, as a means of reducing coronavirus infections during lunch breaks.

These are the circumstances in which the extreme right has attempted to gain traction among a layer of construction workers. Again, the CFMEU is responsible for creating the political climate for this—the union's Australian nationalist politics and promotion of different forms of backwardness are not wholly dissimilar to the fascists' demagogy.

Construction and other workers need to take a clear stand—fascists and extreme right-wing demagogues have no place within the workers' movement.

At the same time, no support whatsoever ought to be given to the CFMEU bureaucracy or to the state Labor government and its grossly inadequate, underfunded, and pro-business COVID-19 response.

Workers ought to form rank-and-file safety committees, independent of the trade unions, to take forward the fight for their independent interests, including the right to a safe workplace and, where that is not possible amid the pandemic, the right to shut down all non-essential production with full income compensation and other support services provided to affected workers. This requires a political struggle against both the federal Liberal-National government and the state Labor government on the basis of a socialist and internationalist perspective.



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