

Australian union chief offers services to the government amid mass anger over COVID surge

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As a tsunami of COVID sweeps across the country, Sally McManus, the head of the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) has issued a public appeal to Prime Minister Scott Morrison, whose bipartisan “let it rip” policies have caused the disaster, to closely collaborate with the national union federation.

Amid a “national crisis” that “calls for “national leadership,” the union chief proclaimed in an open letter this week that “we stand ready to work with Government.”

McManus’ intervention is a warning and a pitch to the ruling elite. While couched in mealy-mouthed words of concern over the dire plight of workers, the clear message is that governments are sitting atop a powder keg of latent opposition. Unless they more directly enlist the services of the union bureaucracy, anger over vast workplace transmission could erupt, and an unprecedented supply chain crisis will deepen, threatening not only the profitability, but even the very functioning of the capitalist economy.

Tellingly, the Murdoch-owned *Australian* featured a report on McManus’ appeal. Just days before, it had published an editorial calling for “co-operation between employers and workers in individual enterprises and between unions, governments and industry groups,” stating: “It is time to resurrect the consultative approach between employers and unions that characterised the early months of the pandemic in Australia.”

McManus’ letter included a thumbnail sketch of the current situation. “Right now, working people and their families are suffering, the toll is physical with so many sick; psychological with high levels of anxiety and uncertainty; and economic as businesses are again shutting down or reducing operations and workers are losing income. In addition, parts of our health care system are being overwhelmed and health care workers are exhausted, and now parts of supply chains are failing with so many workers sick at once. People are struggling to access tests, vaccines and now essentials in supermarkets,” she wrote.

McManus did not spell out the implications, but they are obvious. When people are “suffering,” “exhausted” and “struggling,” they are also angry and opposed to those responsible for inflicting these conditions upon them, chief among them the prime minister to whom she wrote her polite appeal.

This is not an individual phenomenon, or one applying to a handful of sectors, but a mass social experience of the working class. The extent of community transmission is such that over recent days up to half of the country’s truck drivers have been off work because they are infected or close contacts. Anecdotal reports indicate that similar infection tolls are being registered in food production plants, such as

abattoirs, and throughout much of warehousing.

The governments to whom McManus is appealing, both Liberal-National and Labor, have responded by keeping ever-larger numbers of potentially-infected workers on the job. They changed the definition of a close contact to an individual who has spent four hours or more in a home with a positive case, thereby excluding all workplace exposures.

And now, a growing number of those who fit this narrow definition are being instructed to continue working. This has been imposed on workers deemed “essential” in food production and supply, but governments are broadening it to a host of other sectors.

In other words, the situation for millions of workers is intolerable. The ACTU and its affiliates do everything they can to keep a lid on expressions of opposition among workers. But one need only log onto Twitter or Facebook to get a sense of the anger that exists.

McManus’ essential argument is that her own organisation’s extensive experience in suppressing such anger must be utilised. At no point in her letter does McManus challenge or oppose in any way the basic premise that the economy must remain fully open, as the virus spreads unchecked, so that corporate profit-making activities continue.

Instead, she outlines cosmetic proposals, some of which have no chance of being implemented, to take the sharp edges off what is occurring, in words, not reality. To be blunt, the ACTU’s program is to do nothing to halt continuing mass infections, and consequently, deaths.

In her only concrete proposal related to workplace conditions, McManus writes that “mask requirements need to now be upgraded to N95 or P2 standard.” But they are in short supply. The ACTU chief did not even call for the higher quality masks to be provided by governments or employers, meaning workers would pay.

Similarly, McManus calls for “Rapid Antigen Tests to be free and accessible for all.” But because they are also scarce, she writes: “Until supply has been resolved, they should be prioritised for frontline and essential workers.” In other words, even in the unlikely event that Morrison acted on the appeal, it would only be a pledge for universal testing at some point in the distant future. The shift to rapid antigen, moreover, is bound up with the scaling back of far more reliable PCR testing.

McManus writes that the government should “broaden and increase support payments for workers, people out of work and businesses affected by COVID,” but is not even so bold as to suggest a dollar figure.

In the only hint of dissent throughout the letter, McManus condemns

the redefinition of close contacts, and writes that those exposed in workplaces should be included among them and provided with pandemic leave.

But that horse has bolted, without the unions putting up a semblance of opposition.

This was exemplified by the statements of Victorian Labor Premier Daniel Andrews today. He acknowledged the important work of the unions, with whom his government is collaborating closely, while declaring that workers in education, transport and a host of other sectors can now be forced onto the job, even if they are household contacts of a COVID-infected individual.

Governments are sending potentially-ill workers onto the job, moreover, because their policies have resulted in rampant transmission of the virus, such that much of the population has been exposed. The return to a scientifically-based definition of contacts would require urgent measures to dramatically reduce transmission. This would have to include the immediate closure of all non-essential businesses and other lockdown policies, as the only means of ensuring that workers in genuinely essential industries can continue their work, free from the constant risk of COVID exposure. But the government, the ACTU and the corporate elite are determined to prevent any workplace shutdowns.

McManus repeatedly harkened back to the earliest stages of the pandemic, writing: "In 2020 we were constantly meeting with your government to ensure that decision making included a consideration of issues affecting workers. This needs to be reinstituted."

The reference clearly exposes what the ACTU is seeking to do. When the COVID crisis struck, there was widespread anger among workers over government policies allowing the spread of the virus, as well as a social crisis afflicting those in industries that were impacted. Massive queues rapidly formed outside Centrelink welfare offices across the country. Teachers expressed widespread opposition to the reopening of the schools, workers in high-risk industries discussed industrial action.

Under these conditions, the ACTU and the government formed a de facto partnership. McManus and then Industrial Relations Minister Christian Porter unilaterally altered awards covering millions of workers. This cut their conditions, including paid overtime, while ensuring they remained on the job. As the initial lockdown measures which had been instituted as a result of popular demands were ended, the ACTU and its affiliates herded workers back to their places of employment.

The ACTU and the government devised the JobKeeper scheme, a massive government handout to big business to the tune of hundreds of billions of dollars. At the same time, it tied furloughed workers to their employers, who provided them with a limited government-subsidised wage as a means of dampening down social opposition. Meanwhile, the unions enforced further pro-business restructuring in a host of sectors.

Porter publicly described McManus as his new "best friend forever." The *Australian Financial Review* and the *Australian* hailed the partnership.

Above all, the purpose of the collaboration was to prevent the emergence of any independent movement of workers to address the crisis. Everything was to be worked out behind closed doors, in secret talks between the union bureaucrats and big business politicians, as workers were kept on the job.

That is what the unions are seeking to do now. Their aim is to subordinate workers to the very governments that are letting the virus

rip, in the interests of corporate profits. This is a program of continuing mass infection, death and social breakdown.

To defend their health, lives and most basic social rights, workers must take up a struggle against the governments and the unions, which function as an industrial and political police force of big business.

The mass workplace transmission will not be ended through appeals to Morrison or any other politician. Rank-and-file safety committees, independent of the trade unions, must be established at every workplace, to fight for the necessary measures to end transmission and save lives, including through strikes and other forms of industrial and political action.

Non-essential workplaces must immediately be shut, with full compensation for workers and small businesspeople, or the mass spread of the virus will continue. Everything must be done to prevent the government-union plans to reopen the schools at the end of the month, or millions of children will be exposed to a potentially deadly virus.

Essential workers must be provided with advanced safety equipment, including high-grade masks, free of cost, as well as daily rapid antigen tests and PCR tests when they have been exposed to the virus. If they are close contacts, including through workplace transmission, they must be allowed to isolate on full pay for a fortnight. Where necessary, essential workplaces must be retooled to ensure social distancing is possible, and the highest quality filtration systems need to be installed.

Such measures must be aimed at ending transmission, as part of the fight for the global elimination of the virus. The claims that it is possible to "live with the virus," peddled by governments and the unions, stand exposed as lies to justify massive levels of illness and death.

Such a struggle raises the issue of which class controls society and determines its priorities. Capitalism has shown in practice that it is the rule of billionaires and the major corporations, who are willing to sacrifice lives and the most basic public health measures, on the altar of profit.

The interests of the working class are ensuring health, safety, scientifically grounded public health measures and the necessities of life, including a decent income for all. These can only be realised through the reorganisation of society, to meet social need, not profit. That requires a fight for workers' governments and for socialism.



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