

Young workers expose conditions amid Omicron surge in Australia

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13 January 2022

As the Omicron variant of the coronavirus continues to cause a surge of new daily infections throughout Australia and internationally, young people employed in hospitality, retail, warehousing, and other industries are on the frontlines of the virus's spread.

Propelled by the criminal “let it rip” policies of Australia's federal and state governments—Liberal-National Coalition and Labor alike—the profit-driven campaign to reopen businesses and schools across the country has seen the country pass 1 million total COVID infections since the beginning of the pandemic. Daily case numbers are now above 100,000 nationally.

Last week's tragic death of fit, healthy, double-vaccinated 23-year-old James Kondilios in Sydney has refuted the incessant government-media lies that young people will not be affected, especially if they are vaccinated. These lies have been used to justify the lifting of public health measures in the interest of big business which has been supported by the entire political and media establishment, and the pro-business trade union apparatus.

Nina, a 20-year-old café worker in a shopping centre in Melbourne's southeast, said the business is “severely understaffed.” She added that “the boss doesn't really do anything for the workers there. She doesn't put in place any COVID-safe practices. She hasn't even filled out the COVID-safe plan which we were supposed to have. It's pretty shocking. We don't have many staff—it's 4 employees running a whole café. So, most days there's only 2 people working when there should be 3 at least. That means that the two workers don't get a break.”

“The government removed subsidies for small businesses to make sure they stay open no matter the consequences, so this kind of thing is happening to cafés and small businesses everywhere,” she added.

“No one at work has got COVID yet, but it's also unclear because the RATs [rapid antigen tests] aren't that reliable,” Nina noted.

“My coworker did a rapid antigen test which came back negative,” Nina explained, “so my boss got her to come in to work on Sunday even though she's in a household with COVID-positive people. She's only seventeen and spends a lot

of time with her twin sister, so she might very well be positive.

“The boss doesn't put any effort in to support any of the workers. When we're in isolation she doesn't organise with the others a proper roster or let us know when she can go in to help out. She never goes in to help out anyone working there. We're left on our own to organise everything

“I tried to quit this job in December, but I have just been dragged back in because there's no staff. The only reason I'm there is because I am concerned for my coworkers. I'm worried that if I leave, there'll be three staff members running a café and they'll just lose their jobs because it's not going to survive.”

Referring to safety precautions for the workers at the café, Nina said “there's hand sanitiser—that's about it. The place is just running as usual. I wouldn't even know from centre management about the kind of ventilation, but it doesn't seem like it's good because it gets so hot. It's really hard to socially distance. It's a very small space.

“I serve people and, obviously when eating and drinking coffee, people will take their masks off and talk to each other. It's hard to distance from them because I have to drop off food, drinks, clear tables.”

When asked about whether the union has mounted a campaign against the unsafe reopening, Nina said: “Absolutely not. I wouldn't even know about the union for hospitality workers.”

“I also work at a pizza place,” Nina added. “I do delivery driving. I come into contact with so many people. There's no way to trace who I come in contact with and it's hard to distance in the workplace. When I deliver, some people don't wear masks.... The relaxation of public health measures like proper masking, social distancing, lockdowns, and all of that—a lot of people do still take COVID seriously, but there are some who have been influenced by what's being promoted by the government that it's not serious.”

Asked what she thinks has caused the latest surge in cases, Nina said that it is the result of “the policies of the Australian federal and state governments—including the Labor government of Daniel Andrews here in Victoria—of ending all public health measures for the sake of returning workers to work to create profit for big business. It's now spread from people in

workplaces and gatherings over Christmas and New Years. They're pushing this attitude that it's not that serious, or that everyone's going to catch it anyway and there's nothing you can do about it."

"The government's 'let it rip' policy that's allowed the Omicron variant to spread and have an exponential rise in cases infecting so many people could lead to so many more deaths. The death of the young, double-vaccinated 23-year-old just goes to show how serious the situation is.... They say it doesn't matter if you catch COVID because they need workers back at work and children back in schools. It's absolutely criminal.

"Public health measures are important, and they do work when done correctly. COVID is an extremely serious disease and has caused the deaths of millions of people."

Twenty-two-year-old **Lachie** is a warehouse worker at a Cotton On distribution centre in Geelong, a city 60 kilometres southwest of central Melbourne.

Cotton On is a clothing and stationery company, and Australia's largest retailer, employing 22,000 workers globally. With 1,500 stores in 18 countries (600 in Australia), Cotton On's parent company COGI Pty Ltd made a net profit of almost \$69 million from \$1.32 billion sales in the year to June 27, 2021 according to the *Australian*. Lachie said there are around 100 workers in the Geelong warehouse during each shift.

Like many young people in Australia, Lachie has to live in cramped accommodation to afford rent. Having to isolate due to a positive case in the house which he shares with three other young workers and students, Lachie said that he is "worried" about keeping his job. He said his manager "removed the shift she had down for tomorrow because I didn't come in today. There are no other shifts this week.... I'm sort of in between thinking that they're going to have me back or they've replaced me already."

Regarding the safety measures at his workplace, Lachie said there is hand sanitiser in common areas, a trough for handwashing and masks are mandatory but they only supply surgical masks. "One lady goes around wiping down the railing and surfaces, but it's pretty rare," he said.

"We go on picking runs where dozens of people take trolleys, fill them with clothes or whatever for the order, and then bring them back. And then they get passed on to another team to be sorted or to another team who completes partial picks," Lachie explained, "but the trolleys aren't wiped down after."

Lachie said that Cotton On reverted to immediate shift changes, removing the wait time between shifts. "In October/November there was up to an hour in between," he said. "Now, there's no cleaning in between shifts. We just basically cross paths and now the lunch breaks are all muddled together. We were all in bubbles before this. Each team had its own bubble. Now we're jumbled in together." The warehouse worker added that it is impossible to socially distance in communal areas and during shift change.

"In October and November, the workplace brought in a RAT regime in which each bubble got tested on different days about two or three times a week. There were a couple of tents with nurses. Unfortunately, those RATs are unreliable. They've removed temperature checks, and after that they removed the RAT testing in late November with the whole reopening drive by Victorian and international governments. They marched in lock step," he said.

"My coworker tested positive. She's waiting to get a rapid antigen test to see if her infection has passed, but they're out of stock everywhere and they're unreliable. What choice do workers have given PCR test results can take up to a week? You might be locking yourself in for a few weeks. She can't afford that, so in that sense, she's forced to want to go back to work."

Asked if the union has campaigned among workers for better conditions and safety measures, Lachie said: "I forget the union even exists most of the time to be honest. I haven't seen anybody from the union. Never heard of anybody from the union coming in."

Lachie said that the government response to the pandemic has been "criminal," adding: "They've openly worked to butcher contact tracing methods and isolation requirements, basic public health measures, in order to make sure workers are back on the job within a week [of testing positive]. They may be infectious. They may still be ill. In the process, they've also made sure there's a pittance of financial support workers can get if they miss out on work due to isolating. Just \$450 a fortnight. You can't live on that. You'd be living off rations. I pay \$200 a fortnight for rent. But where's money for food, transport, bills? There is none."

In order to protect themselves, Lachie said that, while workers should wear N95 masks and socially distance, public health measures have to be state policy. "What's really required is the shutdown of all non-essential production, and full financial support for all workers and small businesses. There's no other way to stop transmission. With the current level of infection, I think it has to be done as immediately as possible."



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