

Australian unions appeal to business for “COVID-safe plans” to keep a lid on working-class opposition

Oscar Grenfell
19 January 2022

More than a month after Australian governments unleashed a massive surge of Omicron on the population, and weeks after reports first emerged of rampant workplace transmission, Australia’s trade unions held a meeting to discuss the crisis.

The gathering, convened by the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) on Monday, had nothing to do with fighting to protect the safety of workers. The unions have and will continue to enforce dangerous workplace conditions contributing to the spread of the virus and threatening the health and lives of the workers they falsely claim to represent. The privileged union bureaucracy fully defends capitalist interests, including the “profits before lives” pandemic policies.

The unions were compelled to call the meeting because working-class anger over the disastrous situation threatens to get out of control.

Every day doctors and nurses are speaking out about the horrific conditions they confront in hospitals that have reached a breaking point. The situation in factories, warehouses and throughout logistics resembles a war, with the virus sweeping through and decimating entire workforces.

There is mass opposition among teachers and parents to the planned resumption of in-person teaching at the end of this month and early next, under conditions in which the reopening of the schools is sparking mass spontaneous walkouts in the US and other countries.

Under these conditions, the aim of the ACTU meeting was to put on a show of concern, cover up the responsibility of the unions for what has taken place, and prevent the eruption of independent action by the working class. Inevitably the anger would be directed not only against corporations and governments, but the unions themselves.

The statement issued by the meeting demonstrated the close integration of the unions into the political and corporate establishment that is responsible for the mass infections and rising death toll. To the extent that it criticized governments and businesses, it was from the standpoint that their policies risks disrupting the profit-driven “reopening” of the economy.

Chief among the unions’ complaints was the “the failure of the Morrison Government to respond to our requests to work with us during this crisis.” Prime Minister Scott Morrison, together with the state and territory leaders, most of them from the Labor Party,

has overseen the dismantling of safety measures, insisting every day that people must “live with the virus.”

Last week, ACTU secretary Sally McManus wrote a polite open letter to Morrison, pleading with him to work with the unions. The letter harkened back to the early stages of the pandemic, when Morrison and the unions formed a de facto partnership. This involved daily collaboration aimed at keeping a lid on mass anger over policies that allowed the spread of the virus.

McManus presented her offer to the Morrison government, as it, along with the entire political establishment, confronts an unprecedented political crisis in the face of mounting popular opposition.

Their advances going unrequited at this point, the ACTU and its affiliates “determined that despite the Prime Minister not acting to keep working people safe, the union movement will.”

What followed in Tuesday’s union statement was indistinguishable from the toothless, cosmetic advisories of government health and safety bodies. “Accordingly, the meeting today resolved to write to all employers reminding them of their obligation to do all that is reasonable and practical to keep workers safe,” it declared.

The ACTU would request that individual businesses “undertake a new risk assessment for Omicron in consultation with unions.” The unions’ only concrete proposals were limited to one sentence: “For workplaces where working from home is not an option, the provision of free RATs by employers to all workers will be necessary once supply is resolved, alongside upgraded masks and improved ventilation.”

The economy has been fully opened. Governments and the corporations have determined that all industries are essential to profit. The mealy-mouthed reference to “workplaces where working from home is not an option” underscores the fact that the unions have no opposition to the continued operation of non-essential businesses, including those with high transmission, something they have already demonstrated in practice.

As the union statement itself notes, rapid tests are in short supply, rendering the call for their universal provision meaningless. Tests, moreover, do not prevent infection in the first place, merely showing that a worker has already contracted the potentially-deadly virus.

The advocacy for expanded RAT testing dovetails with the

dismantling of more effective PCR testing. It echoes calls from business for the rapid tests to be used to minimise workplace disruptions. The references to improved ventilation and masking are as vague as possible.

Notably, the statement says nothing about one of the most significant attacks on workplace rights over recent weeks. The state and federal governments have repeatedly altered the definition of a “close contact.” That term, which used to mean someone exposed to the virus, now applies only to an individual who lives with a confirmed COVID-positive case. A host of industries have now been provided with exemptions to even that limited definition, allowing businesses to force workers who are likely infected to remain on the job.

The failure of the statement to even mention this issue underscores the unions’ support for the program of keeping the “economy” open at all costs.

In its most widely-cited section, the statement declared: “Where employers do not fulfil their obligations, the union movement determines to do everything within its power to ensure the safety of workers and the community. This may include ceasing work or banning unsafe practices.”

Draconian Fair Work industrial legislation, supported by the unions, does include clauses allowing for workers to walk off the job if they have “a reasonable concern about an imminent risk to their health or safety,” despite banning virtually all other industrial action.

The statement makes clear that any such action would only come about if a business failed to draw-up a “new risk assessment,” meaning stoppages are contingent on a breakdown of backroom talks between the union bureaucrats and company executives. In practice, the “risk assessments” will serve as a mechanism to diffuse anger over workplace conditions and to deepen the collaboration between unions and company management.

Extensive internet searches, moreover, indicate that there is not a *single* documented instance of any union in the country previously invoking the safety provisions to organise or even attempt to organise industrial action during the Omicron surge thus far. This is under conditions in which there have been more than 1.5 million confirmed infections in less than three weeks in a country of 25 million people, and anecdotal reports indicate that transmission has occurred at virtually every workplace.

To the extent that businesses have temporarily shut, it has not been the result of union-organised industrial action. Instead, transmission has been so high that some businesses have run out of workers who are not sick. The unions are continuing to keep workers on the job across the country, and are preparing to enforce the reopening of schools.

Despite this, there have been a number of articles in the financial press, warning that the union meeting could herald the beginning of a wave of COVID-related strike activity. Over the past week, other articles have appeared predicting an uptick of industrial action.

One in the *Australian* stated that some unions were preparing an industrial campaign to fight for higher wages. McManus immediately took to Twitter, angrily declaring that any suggestion she was about to fight for improved pay for workers was “made

up” by the Murdoch media.

The incident highlighted the dynamic underlying the press coverage. The ruling elite knows the unions as its trusted servants who have imposed sweeping attacks on jobs, wages and conditions over the past 40 years, and have implemented the “profits before lives’ program during the pandemic.

The real concern is not with the union bureaucracy, but the mounting opposition in the working class, and the prospect that it will break out of the framework that has been used to suppress the class struggle for decades.

This found striking confirmation in an article in the *Australian Financial Review*, headlined “Union militancy is a major threat to the recovery in 2022.”

The mouthpiece of finance capital stated: “It is revealing that the left-wing leadership of the ACTU is facing criticism from the further left. In accusing the MUA [Maritime Union of Australia] of a blatant sell-out in a recent waterfront dispute, the World Socialist Website said workers must maximise their current leverage and fight for their interests by the ‘construction of new organisations of struggle, totally independent of the corporatised trade unions. This includes the establishment of rank-and-file committees at every work site across the waterfront and the entire logistics sector and beyond.’”

For all the guff about McManus and the ACTU being “left-wing,” the article pinpointed what both the unions and the ruling elite fear most: an independent political movement of the working-class.

Such a movement is the only means of fighting for the measures required to end the pandemic and save lives, including an immediate shutdown of non-essential production, with full compensation for workers, and online learning for the schools and universities. These policies must be part of a broader struggle in Australia and internationally for the elimination of the virus and for a socialist perspective, aimed at reorganising society to meet the needs of working people, not the profits of a tiny corporate elite.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)