

Young workers in Australia speak on dire working conditions amid pandemic

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As the highly-contagious Omicron variant of the virus rips through the population, Australia is experiencing tens of thousands of new infections every day, and hundreds of COVID-19 deaths each week. Yet government policy—as is the case internationally—places the profit interests of the tiny wealthy minority before the lives of the population.

Governments and the media are spreading the lie that young people are not at risk from COVID-19, using this as justification for the pro-business junking of all public health measures to stem the spread of the virus.

The murderous “let it rip” program includes sending school and university students and staff into crowded classrooms.

In addition, young workers are on the frontlines, forced to go to work in dangerous industries like hospitality, retail, warehousing, and delivery services, in which they are at high risk of contracting and spreading the virus.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with **Maria**, a 21-year-old student pharmacist in Melbourne who is undergoing a placement at a pharmacy in a large public hospital.

Maria said that the pharmacy where she is working has had to reduce opening hours due to staff contracting COVID-19. “A lot of the time we would just have one pharmacist on, due to staff shortages because of infections, so that meant that the pharmacist could barely have a lunch break,” she said. “A lot of the pharmacists are working 6 or 7 days a week.”

The pharmacy worker recounted a delivery she had made to a nursing home. “The next morning,” she said, “I found out I had worked with someone who was COVID positive and they were symptomatic. A lot of the time we were being told to turn up to work if we were symptomatic but had a negative RAT [rapid antigen test] result.”

Maria said “I will be in the emergency department and obviously patients will be there who are COVID unknown. I think the worry is giving it to people there. I have reduced my outings as much as possible as a precaution.”

Among the limited safety measures in the pharmacy,

Maria explained, are Pyrex screens at workstations. “Recently, one of the screens was removed and so a lot of the time I found I was just speaking to patients face-to-face. ... During the spread of Delta, we had to wear safety glasses or face shields, but when Omicron started to rip, that was dropped,” she said.

“We used to do temperature checks and hand out masks to people entering but we no longer do that,” she added. “We have seen people coming in with masks that literally had holes in them because they had been used so many times. I think that’s down to the costs of it and the government not subsidising anything.”

Speaking on government support for pharmacy workers’ health and safety, Maria said: “I don’t think we really have received any information. There were no updates on health measures and, if there was, it wasn’t relayed to me and the staff working. ... It was very difficult working over the holiday period where the demand for RATs was so big but there wasn’t enough stock available.”

Maria condemned the shambolic vaccine roll-out in Australia: “I feel bad for people who didn’t have access to the vaccine earlier and could have had a booster before the spread of Omicron. It’s disappointing to see the implications of the government’s mess up. It’s very distressing to be honest.”

“I feel like pharmacists have been left behind,” Maria said. “Since the start of the pandemic, we have had our volume of customers and scripts double—we didn’t have the staff, so everyone was working a lot more than they were used to and a lot of workers are burnt out.”

Maria studies pharmaceutical science at Monash University. “I’m a full-time student and was working weekends. I literally didn’t have a break [during semester],” she explained. “I didn’t find that I had time for my mental health and I had no support as well. I didn’t have time to prepare food or look after myself properly.”

“During lockdown, I was earning less than what people on JobKeeper [meagre wage payments] were receiving while still having to work and study at the same time,” Maria said.

“Pharmacy wages are appalling. You go to university for 5 years, studying a difficult course, and you get paid \$30 an hour as the minimum wage. Everyone is told that you need to work harder and that you are not doing enough. So, you see a lot of young people overworking themselves.”

Denouncing the government’s “let it rip” policies, including the return to in-person learning on the university campuses, Maria stated: “It’s definitely going to lead to outbreaks, there’s no denying that. I can see a lot of anxiety about the return to on-campus learning, especially for those who are immunocompromised or at a greater risk of contracting COVID.”

Maria said that the government’s junking of public health measures is being done “for the economy,” adding: “We were in lockdown for a long time so a lot of businesses lost profit. I guess the government is looking at it as ‘We saved enough people, it’s time to just move on and whoever suffers now, it’s too bad.’ It’s so depressing.”

Tom, 26, works at an inner-city Melbourne café owned by British-based multinational corporation Compass Group. The largest contract foodservice company in the world, Compass Group employs over 500,000 workers internationally and registered a profit before tax in 2021 of £464 million, up from £210 million the previous year.

Tom noted “our working conditions are now just as they were before the pandemic. Our staff is depleted but we have a full team behind the counter again, almost all casuals now, and mask-wearing is optional. They used to provide us with boxes of surgical masks but often these are missing. QR codes remain at the front door, but check-in is no longer enforced. There is no limit on how many diners can sit inside.”

Though no new restrictions were enforced at the café amid the Omicron surge, management told the staff, days after finding out, that three staff members had contracted COVID-19.

“Younger teenage workers in what’s called a ‘casual pool’ have gone months without shifts and mostly lost their jobs,” Tom explained. “Most of the chefs were laid off earlier last year and weren’t replaced. Many part-timers had to quit because they weren’t earning enough to support themselves, even with one or two other jobs.”

Tom said that “close contacts of the three infected workers were only *advised* to get tested themselves but were permitted to continue work if they wanted. Also, once they got tested, they could return to work while waiting for the results, instead of isolating.”

Working at the café for nearly five years, Tom stated: “Me and my colleagues are not in any of the retail or hospitality unions. A friend at work pointed this out the other day, wondering what the unions do because they’ve been totally

non-existent for us. Another fellow worker complained that the unions hadn’t made a single statement about the pandemic.”

Tom also told the WSWS: “My brother caught COVID on a trip to Queensland over New Year’s and possibly brought it back to our family home. He was told by health authorities in Brisbane to isolate for seven days and then fly home without getting tested. He took a RAT when he got home and tested positive. We spoke to the Victorian Health Department, which told us not to worry, that he definitely wasn’t infectious, and therefore we could carry on with our normal lives. My Mum’s boss told her she didn’t officially qualify as a close contact and was encouraged to return to work.”

Referring to an earlier period in which there were at least some mitigation measures in place to stem the spread of the virus, Tom said: “I think if there were any differences on COVID policy between the federal and state governments, they were settled around last August. [Victorian State Labor Premier] Daniel Andrews started dismantling the lockdown even when we still had a thousand cases per day, and said we had to ‘learn to live with the virus.’”

“Abandoning all safety measures was obviously based on financial concerns, not medical science. But people are clearly worried about the situation they face with Omicron.”

Responding to the perspective advanced by the *World Socialist Web Site* for the formation of committees, Tom said: “It’s in our hands now, whether we realise it or not.

“Your call to form rank-and-file committees at workplaces is clearly the right course to take. These discussions do need to take place across the hospitality industry. Omicron is highly contagious and poses a serious threat to workers and their families. In fact, organisation across industries will be the only way workers can protect themselves in the end, because we all face the same dangers.”



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