

Australian pathology workers form rank-and-file safety committee

Pathology Workers Rank-and-File Safety Committee
7 February 2023

On Sunday, January 29, a meeting of pathology workers in Victoria, Australia's second-most populous state, established a rank-and-file safety committee to take forward an independent struggle for their social rights. The committee issued the following statement.

We have formed the Pathology Workers Rank-and-File Safety Committee to fight for safe conditions in our workplace and the workplaces of other pathology workers Australia wide.

We have decided to form our committee as the only means to protect our health, that of our co-workers, our families and patients, who are entirely unaware that they are walking into clinics to have tests and procedures where positive COVID patients could be present. Because this situation exists, especially in regional and rural clinics in Victoria and nationally, we call on workers at other pathology clinics to join our committee to protect yourselves and your patients.

Our workplaces lack basic public health measures, including mask mandates and adequate ventilation, under conditions of the ongoing global pandemic. COVID-19 is allowed to spread everywhere because of the "let-it-rip" policy of Australian state and federal governments.

This is not an accident. It is in line with the deliberate policy of governments and big business to remove public health and infection control measures in order to maximise company profits.

More than 16,500 people have died of COVID-19 in Australia since December 2021, when an alliance of then Coalition Prime Minister Scott Morrison, Liberal-National NSW Premier Dominic Perrottet and Victorian Labor Premier Daniel Andrews spearheaded the dismantling of all measures that effectively stemmed transmission of the virus. This means that over 88 percent of COVID-19 deaths in Australia have

occurred in little over a year.

Purpose-built PCR [Polymerase Chain Reaction] testing clinics have been closed down as the virus rages unrestrained. Accurate infection figures are not kept, so the population is ignorant of the real situation. Officially, over 43 percent of the population has been infected, but blood donor tests suggest the figure is at least 65 percent.

The requirement of referrals from a general practitioner (GP) to access a PCR test is discouraging people from being tested. GPs are leaving the system and patients are increasingly being charged for consultations, creating further obstacles. This is one of the multiple roadblocks the government has erected to reduce the numbers accessing a PCR test.

Following the closure of mass PCR testing sites by state and federal governments, COVID testing has been moved to private pathology clinics.

We are now expected to test patients for COVID, with no extra safety precautions. The company we work for says that full PPE should be worn when testing for COVID. Patients come into the waiting room, however, without knowing whether they are COVID positive, which means that by the time we see them it is too late for staff and the other patients in the clinic.

We are organising independently of the Health Workers Union (HWU) because we have no faith in the unions. The HWU is fully aware of the dangerous conditions that exist in our workplaces and yet they have done nothing to fight them. In fact, the union has enforced these unsafe conditions. Every enterprise bargaining agreement negotiated by the union has seen our conditions go backwards.

The HWU agreed with the ending of COVID public health policies, under conditions where pathology

workers are in close contact with patients when performing the tests themselves.

There are clinics where staff have not received training to deal with COVID patients. COVID-19 testers at mass testing sites used to receive an allowance for this work. Now there is no allowance.

The situation is a game of Russian Roulette. In many of our clinics, patients presenting for COVID testing are seated in a central waiting area alongside other patients. Most of our workload is from patients who need to be regularly tested and are particularly vulnerable to COVID. These include cancer patients who need to be tested for chemo treatment, transplant patients and other immune-compromised patients, as well as the elderly.

Until late last year, patients were required to wear masks in clinics and told not to attend an appointment if they were symptomatic. Since the government lifted mask mandates, patients no longer need to wear them. When pathology workers have put up signs to advise patients to wear masks, they have been told by management that we cannot enforce this.

Throughout the pandemic, we have not had any change to the cleaning routine at the facility. We still have just one hour a week of cleaners. The workload has increased but there has been no increase in staffing or cleaning.

Private pathology companies have made massive profits from PCR testing during the pandemic. Healius Pathology made a net profit of \$307.9 million in the 2021-22 financial year, up from \$43.7 million the previous year. Another pathology company, Sonic Healthcare, last financial year made \$1.46 billion, up from \$1.31 billion the previous year. Australian Clinical Labs made \$178.2 million profit in the 2021-22 financial year, up from \$60.7 million in the previous 12 months.

Now that COVID revenue is declining, these companies want to cut costs, jeopardising the health and lives of pathology workers and their patients.

Our committee issues the following initial demands:

- Dedicated collection sites for COVID-19 tests, preferably drive through
- A paid allowance for those doing COVID testing
- No staff member to be rostered to administer COVID-19 tests without prior agreement
- Mandatory masks for patients in clinics and the

provision of N95s for patients

- Adequate ventilation to meet at least 20 air changes per hour
- A minimum of two hours daily cleaning at all pathology facilities
- Increased sick leave and paid isolation for any staff member who tests positive, as well as those who contract Long-COVID
- At least two members of worker safety committees to be involved in the implementation of these demands
- Full disclosure by pathology companies of the number of workers who have contracted COVID-19

We urge all pathology workers who agree with these demands and want to fight for them in your workplace to join us and get involved!



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