FIGHT FOR EVERY JOB, INCOME SUPPORT FOR ALL

WORKERS SHOULDN’T PAY FOR COVID CRISIS

SPENDING
Lessons from Rudd’s GFC stimulus

TRUMP
Class divide exposed as coronavirus sweeps US

PANDEMICS
Influenza and the 1919 seafarers’ strike
Capitalism is a system of crisis and war
Capitalism is a system of competition, crisis, and war based on exploitation of workers, producing for profit not human needs. Although workers create society’s wealth, they have no control over production or distribution. Through environmental degradation and climate change capitalism has become a threat to humanity’s future and life on earth.

Workers power and socialism
The working class has the power to challenge the existing system and create a better world. We stand for socialism, a society based on democratically elected workers councils which would control and plan the economy to produce for human need. The authoritarian states like Russia and China are not socialist but forms of state capitalism where workers have no power.

What about elections and parliament?
Parliament, the army, the police and the courts are institutions of the capitalist state that maintain the dominance of the ruling class over the rest of society. The capitalist state cannot be taken over and used by the working class, it must be smashed. Workers need to create their own state based on workers councils.

While parliament can be a platform for socialists, real change doesn’t come through parliament. It is won by mass action in strikes, protests and demonstrations.

We are internationalists
The struggle for socialism has no national boundaries. We oppose everything that turns workers from one country against those from another; we campaign for solidarity with workers in other countries.

We oppose borders and immigration controls, and welcome migrants and refugees.

We oppose imperialism and support all genuine national liberation struggles. We oppose Australian nationalism.

Australia is an imperialist power established through genocide on stolen Indigenous land. We support the continuing struggles of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people for land, justice and self-determination.

Oppression and liberation
We oppose sexism, racism, homophobia and transphobia. We fight against all forms of discrimination and the oppression of women, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, migrants, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex people. We oppose discrimination against Muslims and people from the Middle East.

Linking up the struggles
We are active building movements for environmental and social change and economic equality. We are active in our unions and work to build the organisation and self-confidence of the rank and file. We work to bring activists together to strengthen each movement and build a common struggle against capitalism.

Educate, agitate, organise
Socialism cannot be introduced from above, by parliament or parties. The emancipation of the working class is the act of the working class itself.

Solidarity is an organisation of activists, anti-capitalists and revolutionary socialists committed to socialism from below. We are part of the International Socialist Tendency.

A democratic revolutionary party is necessary to deepen resistance to capitalism and to build a movement to overthrow the system. Solidarity members are beginning to build such a party out of today’s struggles against the system.
Things they say

We may well be in a recession, but I would point to the difference between this and a normal recession.

US chair of the Federal Reserve Jerome Powell, as unemployment hit a weekly record of 3.3 million.

Everybody talks as if they know what’s going to happen, and nobody knows what’s going to happen.

Charlie Munger, vice chairman of Berkshire Hathaway Inc. and Warren Buffett’s longtime business partner.

A company that is sharing in $1 billion in government support for airlines must not refuse to meet its basic obligations to others in the industry.

Australian Airports Association CEO, Simon Bourke, dismayed at Qantas rent strike announcement it would not pay any rent owed after 1 February for any leased office space or lounges.

Do what you want mate, I don’t care. This $1000 fine won’t hurt with my $15 million.

A 43-year-old man stopped by police while driving a McLaren in Potts Point just after midnight on a weekend.

This behaviour could only be described as harassment.

A mother in Eltham, Melbourne, who was followed by police as she visited her son’s grave on suspicion of breaching coronavirus health orders.

I treasure the government knowing as little about me as possible.

Barnaby Joyce, a member of the government, on why he won’t be downloading the coronavirus tracking app.

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Migrant worker conditions fuel infection in Singapore

SINGAPORE WAS one of the countries praised as the most successful in reducing coronavirus infections. But it has now suffered a renewed outbreak due to its hidden exploitation of migrant workers.

Workers from countries including India and Bangladesh live 20 to a room in dormitories with bunk-beds as they labour in construction, shipping and assembly lines. Workers also share kitchens and bathrooms in crowded conditions.

The number of cases has doubled in a week to over 9000, including 1100 cases confirmed in a day. Around 60 per cent of those infected are now migrant workers.

While citizens were handed free masks and hand sanitisers by the government, migrant workers were ignored. Prior to the outbreak many of the dormitories even lacked soap and cleaning supplies. In some up to 100 men were sharing five toilets and five showers. Out of Singapore’s total population of 5.8 million people around 1.4 million are overseas workers.

Nationalise Virgin to save jobs

VIRGIN AUSTRALIA has gone into administration, with 16,000 jobs at risk. Its plea for a bailout has been refused, with the federal government saying it wants “a market solution”. That will mean lost jobs, wage cuts and attacks on its workforce.

The government should nationalise it to save the jobs, and stop Qantas securing a monopoly. Virgin’s shares, the nominal cost to buy the company, securing a monopoly. Virgin’s shares, the nominal cost to buy the company, could use its power under the constitution to acquire the business “on just terms”.

According to independent journalist Michael West, the government could use its power under the constitution to acquire the business “on just terms”. As an effectively bankrupt company, with $5 billion in debts and losing more every day, a fair payout for its creditors might be $300 million, he writes. That’s generous—there is no reason to pay them a cent.

The government would have to pay Virgin’s staff until it could restart operations, and maintain the aircraft. If it refuses to act, the workers should occupy the planes, and shut down the airports. That ought to force Morrison’s hand.

Health measures impossible for millions in Africa

CORONAVIRUS WILL devastate the Global South, where billions of people lack basic services and health care.

S’bu Zikode, a leading member of a shack dwellers’ movement in South Africa, told Socialist Worker (UK), “The president says we must stay indoors and carry out social distancing and wash our hands. The strategy assumes that everyone has a secure home and access to services.

“How does this apply to the poor who have no access to water and sanitation? The strategy is blind to the reality of the lives of millions of South Africans.

“In the slums you will find many families living in a shack that is three metres by three metres. And in that there will be four, or six or even eight people.”

In Tafelsig in Cape Town there have been protests as people go hungry due to the lockdown. Residents said the government had promised to deliver food parcels that had not arrived.

Police attacked the protest with rubber bullets and chased demonstrators with armoured cars.

Resident Rosie Matthews told GroundUp, “We must stay at home because of the virus, but where must we get food from?”

Her only income is a small state pension, and her two daughters are now unemployed as a result of the lockdown.

Farmers dump food while hunger surges in the US

THE CLOSURE of restaurants, hotels and schools as a result of coronavirus in the US has produced another obscene example of the failure of the free market—mass dumping of food. At the same time many people are going hungry.

The surge in unemployment has stretched many household budgets, leading to a surge in need for relief from food banks. The Guardian found demand had increased eightfold in some areas.

Meanwhile panic buying has meant grocery stores are struggling to keep shelves stocked.

Yet farmers in the US have huge surpluses of food that can’t be sold. The Dairy Farmers of America co-operative estimates 14 million litres of milk are being dumped each day.

Some has been donated, but many producers now can’t afford to harvest or transport production to where it’s needed.

Farmer Paul Allen in Florida told The Guardian he has had to plough around 2.5 million kilograms of vegetables back into the soil. For both the farmers and those going hungry, this is creating misery in the midst of plenty.

Pell cleared of charges but still complicit in abuse

GEORGE PELL may have been found not guilty, but he and the Catholic Church stand condemned for their contempt for the survivors of abuse by paedophile priests.

Unrepentant, Pell told Andrew Bolt in an interview after his release, “I don’t think the Church has ever got enough credit for the fact that we broke the back of this problem.” Pell says most of the abuse has stopped. But that’s no consolation for the many who suffered.

Pell himself turned a blind eye to the actions of notorious paedophile priest Gerard Risdale, commenting in the Child Abuse Royal Commission that, “It was a sad story and of no interest to me”. Pell shared a house with Risdale and sat on the Church committee that chose to move him around parishes to avoid exposing his crimes. The Royal Commission said there were at least 1880 suspected abusers among Catholic clergy up to 2015.

The “Melbourne Response” Pell established to deal with claims of sexual abuse made victims sign away rights to sue in exchange for meagre compensation. Yet Church assets in Melbourne total hundreds of millions.

For decades Church leaders and the wider establishment helped cover up and perpetuate the abuse. The victims were simply collateral damage in the race to defend the Catholic Church and the role it plays supporting the system.

Plan to import more gas approved

THE GAS import terminal at Port Kembla will be doubled in size after its approval by the NSW government. It will mean increased gas use in NSW and Victoria. Scott Morrison has tried to promote gas as a “transition fuel” to reduce carbon emissions. But its still releases 60 per cent of the emissions of coal.
SO FAR Australia has managed to avoid a coronavirus outbreak on the scale of Europe or the US.

Instead of talking about a six-month shutdown, Scott Morrison is now floating the possibility measures could be relaxed in another four weeks. But that’s more due to good luck than Morrison’s good management.

If the government had properly prepared for a pandemic, testing measures could have been in place months ago. Testing, tracing and quarantine are the backbone of South Korea’s response, where an effective coronavirus test was developed in a week and a mass-testing regime was running within a month of the first cases.

The Australian government has had more time to prepare than elsewhere. Yet the Sydney Morning Herald reports that Intensive Care Unit staff at Sutherland and Westmead hospitals are still having to make their own face shields using plastic covers from stationary notebooks.

Meanwhile the economic fallout from the crisis is accelerating, in the fastest collapse since the Great Depression. The Grattan Institute estimates unemployment could reach 15 per cent, even with the JobKeeper wage subsidy keeping some people in a job.

But many are set to miss out on JobKeeper.

Around 2.2 million people—casual workers employed at their current job for less than 12 months, as well as temporary migrant workers, international students, refugees and asylum seekers have all been left out.

This is cruellest for those on temporary visas, who are not eligible for JobSeeker benefits either. Many are now facing destitution.

For those who now can’t support themselves, Morrison declared, it was time to go home.

Morrison fuelled racism, scapegoating temporary migrants by declaring, “Our priority is on supporting Australians and Australian residents... to ensure that we can maximise the economic supports that we have”.

But if the government can find the enormous $130 billion for JobKeeper, it can find the other $25 billion the Treasurer says it would cost to extend it to everyone.

Unions including the ACTU are calling on the government to include all casuals as well as anyone on a temporary visa.

Morrison keeps claiming that entitlements of all Virgin workers, the Liberals have left their fate to the market. Along with the attacks on awards in other industries, like imposing short-time and forced holidays, this is a taste of things to come.

There won’t be a snap back recovery. The Reserve Bank says wage rises will fall even further.

How we fight now, during the coronavirus crisis, is going to determine what things look like “on the other side.” Christian Porter is boasting that the government has “established a more cooperative approach with the ACTU.” The ACTU should reject his overtures to help the government “reanimate the economy”.

There needs to be a fight for jobs and against wage cuts. We will have to fight to extend JobKeeper subsidies to all, including migrant and undocumented workers, and fight to keep the increase to JobSeeker payments.

We are not powerless. United Workers Union members in warehouses have shown how it is possible to fight around safety conditions at work, and win. Transport workers, cleaners, teachers, workers in supermarkets and warehouses, are not just essential, they have industrial power.

Even for those working from home, industrial action remains possible. In some cases workers at home will have increased bargaining power.

The coronavirus and the economic crisis it has precipitated has exposed everything that is rotten about capitalism. The fight for the future is a fight for a socialist society, in which the resources are democratically controlled to produce for human need not greed.
Coronavirus—the myth that we’re ‘all in it together’

By Caitlin Doyle

“There are no more unions or bosses. There are just Australians now.” So said Scott Morrison in April.

Morrison, and national leaders around the world, say we are “all in it together” during the coronavirus pandemic and the economic crisis it has precipitated. According to Morrison, bosses, workers, landlords and tenants will all be called on to make sacrifices in the name of “Team Australia”.

The Labor Party and sections of the union movement are also calling for greater cooperation with bosses to “save jobs” and Australian businesses.

ACTU Secretary Sally McManus has been having regular video conferences with Liberal Industrial Relations Minister Christian Porter, who has spent the last few years trying to destroy the union movement.

Asked about their new working relationship, Porter said, “if you told me I was going to be BFF with Sally McManus three weeks ago, I wouldn’t have believed you.”

But Morrison’s stimulus measures are aimed at saving businesses, not protecting workers’ living standards.

His JobKeeper wage subsidy provides payments at the minimum wage to allow companies to keep workers employed. The aim, Morrison says, is “keeping… businesses together”, so they can rebound after the crisis.

But it does nothing to force them to keep workers employed on the other side. There is no guarantee workers will still have a job after six months.

And many workers have been left out—including one million casual workers employed for less than 12 months, as well as the 1.1 million migrant workers on temporary visas and refugees and asylum seekers on Temporary Protection Visas or bridging visas.

Even among workers covered by JobKeeper, many will take a hefty pay cut, as there is nothing to compel bosses to make up the difference between the payment and workers’ original pay.

Qantas was handed a $715 million government hand-out only to stand down 20,000 workers the following month. The government has now reduced the notice required before a workplace vote on varying an Enterprise Agreement to just 24 hours.

Rather than compromising with the bosses, there needs to be a fight to defend our jobs and hard-earned conditions. There have been some inspiring examples. NTEU members have won paid sick leave for casuals. UWU members in warehouses have walked off the job over lack of safety measures. Much more of this is needed.

The UWU struck a deal with the Australian Hotels Association to vary the Hospitality Award and allow bosses to reduce employees’ hours and direct them to take annual leave at half pay for three months. Unions have agreed to similar changes to the Restaurant Award and Clerks Award, covering 1.5 million admin workers.

Allowing attacks on workers’ wages and conditions is a huge mistake and sets a dangerous precedent for the oncoming recession.

Bosses are already pushing for further attacks. The Australian Mines and Metals Association has written to the government calling for all Awards and Enterprise Agreements to be suspended for six months, removing all working conditions and wage rates.

The government has now reduced the notice required before a workplace vote on varying an Enterprise Agreement to just 24 hours.

Rather than compromising with the bosses, there needs to be a fight to defend our jobs and hard-earned conditions. There have been some inspiring examples. NTEU members have won paid sick leave for casuals. UWU members in warehouses have walked off the job over lack of safety measures. Much more of this is needed.

The idea that workers and bosses are “in it together” arises from the idea that we have a common, national interest. This is a myth.

During every serious economic crisis the rich try to force the cost onto workers. The Morrison government has backed the Retail Association’s call for a 12 month freeze in the minimum wage—a wage cut after inflation. This mirrors the way wages were frozen at the time of the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) in 2008.

But when the minimum wage was cut by 10 per cent during the Depression, unemployment levels remained the same as bosses pocketed the savings.

All over the world workers are still suffering from the austerity introduced after the GFC. Meanwhile, the top 1 per cent now own more than half the world’s wealth. In Australia, after the economic crisis of the late 1970s, unions, business and government came together to design the Prices and Incomes Accord. This slashed wages and drastically reduced union power.

If the coronavirus crisis has shown anything, it is that none of the “essential work” done under capitalism—healthcare, food services, deliveries, teaching, IT, media production—is done by billionaire bosses.

Australian workers have far more in common with the migrant workers and international students who will miss out on any extra financial support than we do with “Aussie” bosses.

The coronavirus crisis is going to deepen the division between those at the top and the rest of us. Rather than trying to smooth over those divisions, unions and workers need to fight the bosses every step of the way, not only to defend our existing conditions, but to win real, lasting changes to society.

Above: Industrial Relations Minister Christian Porter has developed a chummy relationship with the ACTU.

Coronavirus—the myth that we’re ‘all in it together’
Pressure builds for action as uni staff face savage cuts

By Marcus Banks
NTEU Delegate RMIT

MOMENTUM IS growing at universities to take collective action to defend our jobs and conditions. In the last month, well over 1000 casual workers were sacked—200 at RMIT, Melbourne University and La Trobe, and similar numbers at many other universities. Union Branches across the country are calling for our national and state officials to mount serious national action to pressure Morrison to fund COVID-19 shortfalls.

The government is hitting the sector’s quarter of million workforce hard on two fronts.

First, Morrison is refusing to include universities in its $320 billion COVID-19 bail-out package. The $18 billion funding the government announced for universities is not new money—it is its usual annual contribution to the sector. Unless Morrison provides another $5 billion—a paltry addition to his package—21,000 jobs will be lost in the next six months. Larger universities are locked out from accessing the JobKeeper payment as their revenues have not dropped by the required 50 per cent.

In the university sector, the government’s exclusion of casuals and workers on temporary migrant visas from JobKeeper subsidies has a particularly divisive and racist impact. There are thousands of casually employed students as well as many tutors and academics on temporary migrant visas. None can access JobKeeper, and many miss out on JobSeeker as well.

These assaults are just the beginning. In the next three years, the COVID-19 crisis is expected to slice revenue by $25-$40 billion—mainly due to the loss of income from the international students the “business models” of universities heavily rely upon.

The Morrison government has opened a second crucial front—giving Vice-Chancellors a big stick to attack wages and conditions in collective agreements. University managers can now force changes within 24 hours through an emergency staff vote. Despite being eligible for $50 million in JobKeeper funding, smaller universities such as La Trobe University are already preparing to ram through changes, claiming in an all-staff letter that the crisis means that “wage-related concessions to save costs, including pay freezes, pay reductions, redundancies and early retirement” are urgently needed.

National officials’ response

The response so far from National NTEU officials has been to buckle on both lines of attack—accepting that Morrison won’t provide COVID-19 funding and that Vice-Chancellors could scare staff into agreeing to major attacks on their jobs, wages and conditions. The NTEU National Executive’s aim has been to soften these attacks by negotiating with universities for a temporary “National Jobs Protection Framework” to vary collective agreements.

Their approach is a disaster. It abandons the 70 per cent of staff in the sector who are employed casually to immediate sackings. It exposes all staff to increased workloads, unpaid work, wage cuts and retrenchment. Crucially, it is an approach that says the union does not have any confidence that members can stand up to these attacks.

Members and activists across the country are rejecting this pessimism. Staff are joining the NTEU in droves. Over 1000 members have attended state-wide union meetings in Victoria and NSW. Hundreds are attending campus-wide Branch meetings looking for ways to be involved in resisting the attacks.

Branches at RMIT, Melbourne, La Trobe, Flinders, Sydney, Victoria University, Sunshine Coast and Monash have voted overwhelmingly to reject giving any concessions that would result in cuts to jobs, pay or conditions. Many are calling for collective action now—to join car cavalcades on 1 May and to organise a militant National Day of Action next month.

Shamefully, the national leadership of the union has ignored these calls and doubled-down on pushing its strategy, asking members in less organised Branches to complete a survey about which conditions in their Collective Agreements they are willing to give up to “save jobs”.

Some left activists are arguing that resistance be focussed solely on getting out the “No” vote on each campus in ballots on agreement variations.

While voting against concessions on pay and conditions is crucial, Solidarity and other NTEU members argue that there are problems with solely focussing on this. First, it accepts that a political and industrial campaign cannot be built to pressure the Morrison government to include universities in its bail-out.

Second, it sidelines building actions such as the 1 May convoy and a National Day of Action—collective activity which actually builds member confidence to vote no, if and when Vice-Chancellors try to force a staff vote.

Third, building a fighting union to defend jobs, pay and conditions will take more than voting. Taking industrial action will be essential. In a time of crisis the old rules restricting legal industrial action to bargaining periods can be challenged if people have built up confidence in taking action first.

The convos are a good first step. In a welcome development, those activists holding to the “vote no” strategy are beginning to include these arguments in their campaign work.

Above: The NTEU needs to begin a national campaign for government bailout funding and against cuts

Hundreds are attending Branch meetings looking for ways to be involved in resisting the attacks
CORONAVIRUS

Saving capitalism from itself: lessons from Rudd’s GFC stimulus

By Jean Parker

WITH THE world facing the sharpest economic downturn in the history of capitalism, governments are turning overnight from neo-liberal budget-balancers to Keynesians on steroids. Trillion-dollar packages have been handed out to prop up businesses, and even pay workers’ wages. In Australia Morrison has already pledged an astonishing $320 billion.

In the face of the 2008 Global Financial Crisis (GFC) then Labor Prime Minister Kevin Rudd spent $75 billion to stimulate the economy. Like now, Australia’s response was part of a “Keynesian moment”, when neo-liberal governments threw money into their economies to try to halt the global financial meltdown precipitated by the implosion of the US sub-prime property market.

The immediate nature of today’s crisis is different. Governments are actively suppressing sections of the economy to enforce social distancing measures. Rather than “stimulate” economic activity, they are trying to keep capitalism on life support in the hope of a “v-shaped” bounce-back once the pandemic is over. At that point they will face the challenge they faced in the GFC—how to restore profitability and create the conditions for renewed capitalist investment.

In 2008, Rudd went harder and faster than many Western leaders. His package included infrastructure spending on social housing and school halls. Since then, debate around Rudd’s stimulus has been dominated on the one hand, by Labor’s claim that its programs kept Australia out of recession, while, on the other, the Liberals have pilloried the “roots” associated with the programs, and attacked Labor for pushing the budget into deficit.

The centrepiece of Rudd’s stimulus was the $42 billion Nation Building and Jobs plan, released in February 2009. The Plan included immediate cash payments of $950 to welfare recipients, pensioners and students, similar to the $750 payments Morrison announced on 12 March.

Each element of Rudd’s plan was designed to hold up sections of business that were faltering. After the cash payments designed to inject money into the retail sector, there were programs like building school halls and the fatal “home insulation program”, that gave quick work to construction companies and some manufacturers. Finally there was money for longer-running infrastructure programs such as building social housing and roads and bridges.

End of neo-liberalism?

Compared to Obama and many other Western leaders, who responded to the crash of 2008 by bailing out the very banks that had caused the crisis, Rudd’s stimulus seemed to benefit the community. In a pretentious 8000 word essay in The Monthly, Rudd portrayed his program as a break with neo-liberalism and a return to social democracy. Many unionists and activists drank the Kool-aid and thought the days of market fundamentalism were over.

But Rudd’s programs, like Morrison’s this time, were all designed to be temporary. The government would fill the chasm created by the market so that business could spring back to life and take all the gains. Every aspect of the stimulus was delivered by private corporations. Rudd refused to reverse the privatisation and corporatisation of the public service to increase public ownership and control—capacity that could have been used to solve the climate crisis for instance.

Rather than re-create a public works workforce to build school halls or social housing, Rudd wrote blank cheques to major construction companies like Bovis and Lend Lease. The Home Insulation Program was even worse. Rudd threw delivery of the program open to the market by offering payments to any shonky start-up that wanted them. Call centre operators cashed-in by sending untrained back-packers into people’s roofs. Heat stress and electrocution killed four young insulation workers; there were hundreds of house fires.

Labor can rightly claim some credit for keeping Australia out of recession. But the fact that the Chinese government spent 12 per cent of GDP building entire cities probably had a bigger impact on the Australian economy.

As Rudd’s programs wound down, it was back to “business as usual”. Neo-liberalism snapped back as Labor and Liberal governments went back to cutting services to maintain balanced budgets.

In his own words, Rudd wanted to save capitalism from itself. Twelve years after the GFC, capitalism has plunged into an even deeper crisis. Suddenly the normal austerity economics is being suspended as bosses demand state support to survive.

But as Morrison signed a cheque to fund free childcare he insisted, “This is only temporary”. He expects to take back the increased dole payments and the wage subsidies for casuals too.

We can’t afford to go back to business as usual. The government funding of childcare centres, private hospitals, airlines and wages for millions of workers shows the possibility of creating a system geared to meet the needs of ordinary people. But to do that we need to permanently take control of society out of the hands of the profit-mongering corporations and the governments that serve them.

Rudd refused to reverse the privatisation of the public service to increase public ownership and control
ON GOOD Friday Solidarity’s Chris Breen was arrested for helping to organise a car cavalcade protest past the Mantra Hotel in Preston, Melbourne.

“I have been charged with ‘incitement’ and police have seized my phone and all my computers,” Chris explained.

“I am proud to be inciting support for refugees, our protest was safe, detention is not. I and the wider refugee movement will not be intimidated and will not stop acting in solidarity with refugees.”

Activists from the Refugee Action Collective organised the protest to call for the release of the 70 refugees held in detention at the Mantra hotel, where they are at high risk of coronavirus infection.

Refugee activist Lucy Honan, who was part of the convoy, told Solidarity, “Up to 40 activists in cars and on bikes blared our horns up Bell Street and around the Mantra, and made it loud and clear to the refugees and the media that we were not intimidated by the huge police presence.

“Neighbours came out to their front lawns to take photos and show support. Our cars were covered with our message: ‘health care not detention’, ‘stop the racism, free the refugees’.”

The refugees there are among those brought from Manus and Nauru to access medical treatment, and have been in detention for almost seven years.

Police intercepted cars and told protesters they would receive fines in the mail.

According to police a total of 26 people were fined $1652 each for leaving home without a valid excuse—a total of almost $43,000 in fines—despite ensuring the protest was entirely safe, with activists confined to their cars together with other members of their households only.

“The police operation was a hypocritical, organised attempt to use health powers to squash dissent and protest,” Lucy said.

This is an appalling attack on the right to protest that must be firmly resisted.

It is clear the protest is being targeted. Another refugee supporter in Brisbane was slapped with a $1500 fine for watching from the footpath as refugees in the Kangaroo Point motel held a protest a few days later.

Yet Victoria police allowed a car convoy in Eildon, to wish a resident a happy 100th birthday, go ahead unhindered. It was even covered on the local TV news.

“This obviously has much wider implications for the unions and social movements”, Chris said.

“A United Workers Union convoy of 30 cars was not treated in the same way on Thursday, despite a police presence—but what happens to union protest in future is now an open question.”

“We cannot be complacent that things will bounce back to normal in a few months. We will need safe ways to publicly protest. Health rules around coronavirus can’t be used to stamp out the right to protest.”

Government hypocrisy

“The hypocrisy is staggering,” he pointed out, “people can drive to Bunnings, or JB Hi-Fi, or to get a haircut, and in Victoria it is still legal to drive to a holiday home, but we can’t drive around the block to highlight the lack of safety for vulnerable refugees with underlying health conditions.

“The most odious hypocrisy is with the unsafe conditions in detention themselves.

“Premier Daniel Andrews has had not one word to say about the conditions for refugees in Scott Morrison’s detention centres, which are the equivalent of cruise ships on land—a health risk for refugees and for all of us.”

As Moz, one of the refugees detained in the Mantra, put it, “If the rules are for everyone why don’t police fine and arrest Serco officers at Mantra. It’s hypocrisy.”

From their Facebook page “Manus to Mantra” the refugees inside thanked the protesters, calling them, “brave and courageous... to come and show us your support despite restrictions, we are really sorry that you guys get arrested and fined”.

“The police came to my house around 12 noon, so I did not even get to attend the protest,” Chris said.

“I had to sit in close proximity with three police for half an hour in a police car waiting to get into the station. Then I sat in a car in close proximity with three different officers as they drove me to my house to raid it.

“In my house there were six police in total, none of whom practiced social distancing (staying 1.5 metres away) either with myself or with each other.”

Refugee Action Collective have vowed to challenge the fines in court.

“I will not stay silent, the refugee movement will not stay silent, we will not cease our protests until the camps are closed and every refugee is free,” said Chris.

They deserve everyone’s support. We need to campaign to drop the charges and drop the fines, and to free all the refugees.

“Health rules around coronavirus can’t be used to stamp out the right to protest.”
Hutchison wharfies win COVID-19 safety measures

By an MUA member

AFTER A ten day standoff with Hutchison, Sydney wharfies returned to work on Sunday 12 April after winning dramatic safety improvements to manage the risk of coronavirus at work.

Employees had not set foot in the terminal since Friday 3 April, when the first of two COVID-19 cases in the workforce was revealed.

The company had recklessly withheld information from the workforce. Then, in the days after, they downplayed the number of workers who had potentially been exposed and tried to exclude the union from assisting in the tracing process.

However, a “cease-work” order issued by a Health and Safety Representative (HSR) from the safety committee brought work to a halt. The order outlined the company’s failure to put safe systems of work in place. The Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) demanded widespread testing for employees, better systems to allow for social distancing and minimising shift interaction, and adequate cleaning processes.

The cease-work order was upheld by SafeWork NSW—a significant decision—as SafeWork NSW are well-known as an unreliable ally for workers when it comes to safety disputes.

But, despite the safety orders, Hutchison ignored the seriousness of the situation, and continued to allocate workers to shifts every day from 6 April. The wharfies, however, called in absent—citing compliance with the cease work order.

In a belligerent email the company said it was, “disappointing that some are engaging in industrial action”.

They have now confirmed their intention to dock workers’ pay for these shifts.

WINS

Despite these threats, important safety measures have been won. Importantly, the cease-work was in place for long enough for many workers to be tested and to significantly reduce the chance that any potentially COVID-19 positive worker could have transmitted the virus to others.

A full-time COVID-officer—an HSR—has been rostered on to every shift for a week to ensure the new safety policies are implemented.

Toolbox talks (at the start of every shift) are now separated into small work-groups. At change of shift, everyone completely leaves the terminal before the next shift enters. There are also restrictions on numbers in utes, vans and rooms, as well as additional PPE (personal protective equipment) measures, and a cleaning checklist to be completed throughout each shift.

But there will need to be an ongoing fight to stop the company docking pay, to ensure the new safety measures are properly implemented, and that the union site committees are properly consulted and involved in managing any future coronavirus cases. The win sets a precedent for the safety standards workers need everywhere, and shows what a highly unionised and organised workforce can achieve.

Testing

From the beginning, the union demanded mass coronavirus testing for the workforce.

Whilst the company only identified 17 potential close contacts of the COVID-19 positive employees, this number doubled in size after input from the union and site committees.

If Hutchison had acted decisively from the start, instead of covering up and downplaying the risks, testing of the workforce could have started much earlier, giving a much clearer picture of the level of risk.

Around 250 employees share turnstiles, machinery, smoko rooms, kitchen facilities, change rooms and bathrooms. NSW Health’s narrow definition of a “close contact” does not account for this.

In the end, the NSW Chief Medical Officer agreed that those who had worked between 24 March and 3 April were at risk. But the company never reported this to the workforce.

Testing and rigorous tracing have been an important part of the response in countries that have kept the virus under relative control.

The horrifying debacle of the Ruby Princess cruise ship, which has now claimed 21 lives, should never have happened; all the crew and every passenger should have been tested with those disembarking quarantined before re-entering the community. The MUA and the International Transport Federation (ITF) have now won testing for all remaining crew.

The double standards and inconsistencies of the authorities’ response to this crisis are staggering. Many heavy-handed fines have been handed out by police against people outside the house.

And yet at work, wharfies risk being penalised for taking safety too seriously.

It is all too easy to get slapped with a $1000 fine, and yet near impossible to meet NSW Health’s over-the-phone criteria to access a test. The opposite should be true.

The priorities of a sick system are on display. But the fight at Hutchison showed how, with organisation, workers and ordinary people can take these priorities into our own hands and put health and safety ahead of profit.
WORKERS IN a number of warehouse distribution centres have won increased safety measures against coronavirus after walking off the job. They have shown how to stand up to bosses who put their profits before workers’ lives.

United Workers Union (UWU) members at the Coles Distribution Centre in Laverton, Victoria as well as AHG Refrigerated Logistics and Bremick Fasteners in Sydney have all taken action.

Warehouses delivering groceries as well as frozen or long life perishables to supermarket chains are remaining open throughout the Covid-19 crisis as essential parts of the economy.

But the bosses have been failing to provide workers with essential protective equipment including basic PPE, adequate cleaning and special leave and policies for workplace contamination.

According to UWU National Director Matt Tonon, “80 per cent of our members are still working. Childcare workers, food factory workers, warehouse workers are still going to work. Without these guys the country would not work”.

Warehouse workers have won the right to talk to us.

In 2018 Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) members at Hutchison, Port Botany stopped work after a serious safety incident involving a shuttle carrier which left the worker involved in a coma.

More recently port workers again used the provisions to stop work over toxic smoke during December’s bushfires.

While Morrison claims “we’re all in this together”, workers are being made to pay for the crisis with job losses, cuts to wages and conditions and unsafe workplaces.

OH&S provisions are a legal way for workers to use stop work action to win demands around workplace health and safety.

But workers and unions should be prepared to use this to defend workplace conditions including the demand for special paid leave during the Coronavirus crisis.

Stop work actions show the power of workers to defend their rights during health and economic crises and also provide opportunities to strengthen union organisation in the workplace.

As Coles Distribution Centre delegate John Abrahams put it, “we used to be important, now we’re essential. They can’t do it without us. If we go down, everything else falls apart”.

For those still at work, fighting for adequate safety and social distancing measures is crucial. These workers have shown how to win them.
Amid pandemic, Trump steps up aggression against Venezuela

By Mark Goudkamp

ON 1 April, as COVID-19 deaths in the US soared, Donald Trump announced that US navy ships, some carrying helicopters and ground troops, were heading closer to the Venezuelan coast to stop “cartels, criminals, terrorists and other malign actors” exploiting the pandemic to smuggle drugs to the US.

Trump’s threat followed US Attorney General William Barr’s announcement that Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro and other government officials would be indicted on drug-trafficking charges, with bounties for their capture, including $15 million for Maduro.

However, US ally Colombia remains the world’s largest cocaine producing and exporting nation, despite the US spending billions between 2000-2015 on its “war on drugs” through Plan Colombia. Even anti-Maduro sources like the Washington Office in Latin America stress that less than 10 per cent of the cocaine bound for the US passes through Venezuela and the eastern Caribbean, while over 90 per cent goes through Central America, with the pro-US governments of Honduras and Guatemala heavily implicated.

While a full-scale military intervention does not seem imminent, similar US monetary rewards preceded US invasions of Manuel Noriega’s Panama in 1989, and of Saddam Hussein’s Iraq in 2003.

As of 20 April, Venezuela had less than 300 confirmed coronavirus cases and ten deaths—far fewer than surrounding Latin American countries (Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador and Peru) where the virus is spreading at alarming rates. However, tens of thousands of around four million Venezuelans who had fled the country since 2015, as its economic crisis hit, have been made jobless and are returning home.

The European Union, the United Nations Secretary-General and even a group of Democratic Party Senators have urged the US to lift sanctions against Venezuela, Iran, and Cuba because of the pandemic.

Yet this seems unlikely. Trump and Pompeo are determined to see “regime change” in Venezuela, and it’s a source of frustration for the US that the Maduro government is still there despite its backing of last year’s coup attempt led by Juan Guaidó.

The day before Trump’s military threat, Washington made the lifting of sanctions conditional on Maduro’s resignation, the appointment of an “interim government” involving the opposition, the scrapping of Venezuela’s security agreements with Russia and Cuba, and future elections with neither Maduro nor Guaidó as candidates.

Far from being socialist, the Maduro government is imposing austerity, and continues to ask the IMF for loans to pay off its debt. With global oil prices falling sharply, Venezuela’s main source of revenue continues to decline.

Marea Socialista (Socialist Tide), which is critical of the Maduro government from the left, argues: “The Venezuelan people are plagued by the anti-worker and anti-popular policies of the Nicolás Maduro government, with a systematic hardening of the repression against workers, peasants and sectors of the popular movement to impose their adjustment policy.”

We need to oppose foreign intervention—but Venezuela’s workers also need to build a genuinely socialist alternative.

Hungary’s government seizes autocratic power

HUNGARY’S GOVERNMENT has effectively declared itself a dictatorship under the guise of combating the coronavirus.

Its parliament voted to allow the government—run by the far right Viktor Orban and his Fidesz party—to rule by decree.

That means it can do what it likes without having to go through parliament. All by-elections and referendums have been suspended. Orban said the government would now have the powers needed to tackle the virus. Anyone who promotes “distorted facts” that may “alarm or agitate” the public faces prison for up to five years.

What’s more, there’s no time limit on the new powers. It’s effectively up to the government to decide when—or if—it gives them up.

This is a warning of the dangers of letting governments use the coronavirus to bring in sweeping new powers. In France, a coronavirus bill has granted the President new powers until April next year to introduce extended periods of detention without charge, and impose house arrest and electronic surveillance.

Around 100,000 police have been deployed to stop anyone leaving home and to question them about whether they have a valid excuse. People are required to carry permits specifying why they have left the house. A series of shocking videos have shown police engaged in brutal attacks against people of Arab and African background as well as the homeless.

Even here, we have seen police given the power to impose fines of up to $1,652 in Victoria, and similar amounts in other states, giving them an excuse to stop and harass people outside the house.

All these measures have been implemented in the name of responding to the health crisis. But once a government has won the argument for new laws, it’s far easier for them to argue to keep them.

Adapted from Socialist Worker UK

Trum and Pompeo are determined to see “regime change” in Venezuela

Above: Venezuelan President Nicholas Maduro
Virus exposes class inequality at global capitalism’s heart

By Tom Orsag

THE UNITED States, the world’s richest nation, is struggling to deal with the coronavirus due to decades of government cutbacks and a dysfunctional political system headed by a President, Donald Trump, who is a charlatan and an habitual liar.

The US now has more deaths from coronavirus than any other country.

New York City’s appalling death count is an indictment of Trump, the free market and the private health care system in the US.

But the virus is not hitting everyone equally. It is workers and the poor dying in huge numbers as the product of a yawning class divide.

In New York, public advocate Jumaane Williams told The Guardian, the virus has exposed the two societies in one country, “One society was able to run away to the Hamptons or work from home and have food delivered to their door; the other society was deemed ‘essential workers’ and made to go out to work with no protection.”

Already 71 subway workers and bus drivers have died from coronavirus.

They were forced to buy their own masks and cleaning products for a month before their employer agreed to distribute them to all workers. African-American and Latino New Yorkers are dying at double the rate of white New Yorkers. They make up 70 per cent of the city’s essential workers.

The same is true across the country. In Wisconsin, black people are 6 per cent of population but account for 40 per cent of deaths from coronavirus.

Trump loses control

Yet Trump is now pushing to end the lockdowns and re-open the economy, even as the virus is just starting to hit parts of the country.

He is more concerned with the profits of big corporations and keeping up the economic growth he thinks is important to his re-election chances than with protecting human lives.

In the context of the complete failure to control the spread of the virus this means thousands more people will die.

He first said he wanted the US to re-open for business by Easter, but has now nominated 1 May. Trump is encouraging protests by small far right groups against the lockdowns in US states run by Democratic Party governors.

Trump’s initial response to the pandemic in late January was to ignore WHO warnings saying, “We have only five people [with infection]. Hopefully everything is going to be great.”

Trump has purged and driven out advisers who don’t tell him what he wants to hear.

Luciana Borio was once on his National Security Council but left after a purge of the US Global Health Unit. She went public in late January saying that there would be a health crisis if Trump did not change course.

In April 2018, the Trump administration began dismantling the unit in charge of pandemic response. The administration made known it would cut the budget of the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

There has been a complete failure on the three basic measures for controlling a pandemic—widespread testing, contact tracing of those with the virus, and targeted quarantine.

US health authorities lost crucial weeks at the beginning of the virus’s spread due to an inability to carry out testing.

The CDC badly bungled the production of tests for the new virus, first refusing to use the test developed by the WHO and successfully used elsewhere, then producing faulty test kits.

This meant testing criteria had to be narrowly restricted and limited the number of tests that could be performed.

Hospitals are also suffering drastic shortages of protective equipment for staff.

A new N95 mask is supposed to be worn when treating each patient. But staff have been forced to use the same masks for weeks on end. Susan Puckett, a medical assistant at Boulder Medical Center in Colorado told Vox she had been forced to use the same mask for three weeks, until it broke.

The US public health response has been weakened by years of cutbacks by both Republican and Democratic Presidents, Congresses and state governments.

Workers strike back

In response a wave of workers’ resistance has emerged, with US workers going on strike to demand adequate protection from their employers.

Hundreds of Amazon workers have called in sick, held protests or gone on strike due to the company’s failure to offer protective gear or paid sick leave.

One warehouse in New York staged a walkout. The company is now the country’s second biggest employer.

They have also been strikes across 500 fast food restaurants in Chicago, health care workers in California and New York, and garbage collectors in Pittsburgh.

These sparks of resistance are the hope amidst the horror.
HOW CAN GOVERNMENT SUDDENLY FUND BILLIONS FOR BAILOUTS?

Scott Morrison and other leaders worldwide are suddenly spending billions to prop up their economies only because capitalism’s health is at risk argues James Supple

THE SCALE of the government spending announced in recent weeks is staggering. Scott Morrison has revealed three huge spending packages totalling $320 billion.

Nor is Morrison alone. The US has agreed to spend $2.2 trillion, as part of a stimulus package thrashed out between Donald Trump and the US Congress. Globally over $13 trillion has already been committed—and more is on the way. So why are governments suddenly taking such dramatic action?

The answer is the scale of the economic collapse capitalism is facing. As Martin Wolf put it in the bosses’ Financial Times, “it is much the biggest crisis the world has confronted since the second world war and the biggest economic disaster since the Depression of the 1930s”.

Governments worldwide have imposed lockdowns in the hope of slowing the spread of the virus, forcing businesses to close and crippling whole economies.

Retail and hospitality businesses have folded due to loss of sales. Many airlines are also on the brink of collapse, and the knock-on effects are flowing through other industries. The IMF expects the Australian economy to contract by 6.7 per cent this year.

The economy is facing a collapse faster than that during the Great Depression as huge swathes of industry come to a sudden halt.

Morrison’s aim is to save capitalism, through short term measures designed to keep businesses intact and allow them to make it to “the other side” of the pandemic. The hope is to save as many businesses as possible from going to the wall.

The state has often had to step in to play this role in an economic crisis. Central to the job of the state under contemporary capitalism is providing the conditions in which the free market can function.

So in the last economic crisis in 2008, the US spent $700 billion to bail out the banks when the financial system seemed on the verge of collapse.

In Australia, then Labor Prime Minister Kevin Rudd spent $75 billion on stimulus measures in order to prop up the economy and avoid a recession.

Another Keynesian moment

This involved using Keynesian methods of increasing government spending to generate demand for goods and services, pioneered by the economist John Maynard Keynes.

Demand would otherwise have drastically shrunk as, in the private sector, companies collapsed and workers lost jobs and income.

The idea is that government intervention can reduce the scale of the economic slump, creating the conditions for renewed boom.

This is a challenge to the usual neo-liberal economic orthodoxy, which has dominated government and official policies since the late 1970s, involving a retreat from government intervention in the economy in favour of worship of the free market as the way to solve economic problems. Privatisation and cutbacks to government spending on health and education have been the order of the day.

Yet in the face of a developing economic collapse, the failure of governments to step in would only result in a deeper recession that would be even more damaging for capitalism. That is the lesson mainstream economists drew from the 1930s Depression, when wage cuts and government austerity only served to make the crisis worse.

The sums being spent now are enormous. The scale of government intervention shows the possibility of massively expanding spending to meet human and environmental needs, from funding a transition to renewable energy and climate jobs, expanding social housing, addressing the inequality in schools funding or providing quality healthcare for everyone in need.
The usual arguments about the need to reduce government debt and ensure a balanced budget have been thrown out the window. But all of this is designed as a temporary measure to allow capitalism to return to exploitation as usual.

As Solidarity shows elsewhere (see page 8), this is precisely what happened following the stimulus spending during the last crisis in 2009. The Labor government went from spending billions on stimulus measures to budget cuts that slashed spending once the crisis was over.

The same exercise is being prepared this time around. They will again want workers to pay the costs of recovery through cuts and attacks on workplace rights. Morrison has already flagged a raft of new pro-business reforms, saying, “policy frameworks... will need to be reconsidered.”

That means, “Tax and industrial relations reform, deregulation, and fast-tracked infrastructure are back in the mix”, as the Financial Review explained.

Tax cuts for big business, abandoned in the face of opposition in the Senate, are likely to be put back on the table. All this shows the hypocrisy of Morrison’s calls for workers to sacrifice in the face of the coronavirus crisis because “we’re all in it together”.

When the immediate crisis passes, it will be workers that are expected to make all the sacrifices so business can expand profits.

Modern Monetary Theory: Is government money the answer to the slump?

HISTORIC LOW interest rates globally mean governments can currently borrow for practically nothing. In March the Australian government was able to borrow $1.2 billion for 12 years at an interest rate of just 0.8185 per cent.

Scott Morrison is raising the over $200 billion in stimulus spending announced so far mainly through borrowing from private investors and accumulating government debt.

Some governments are already taking unusual measures to fund their spending splurge. In the UK, the Bank of England, which is supposed to operate independently of government, has agreed to finance government spending directly, through buying debt. The measures would only be “temporary and short term”, it claimed.

In the aftermath of the global financial crisis in 2007, central banks in the US, Europe and Japan began “quantitative easing” programs, where they bought government debt as well as some mortgage debt from the banks in order to inject extra money into the financial system. This was effectively a way of printing money.

Some economists claim governments could keep printing money indefinitely to create jobs and increase spending on services like health, education and welfare. This idea, known as Modern Monetary Theory (MMT), has become increasingly popular on the left, endorsed by figures including US democratic socialist Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez as well as a key economic adviser to Bernie Sanders. It has been promoted as a way to fund programs like a Green New Deal.

They argue that, if a government is able to issue its own currency, it need never worry about the size of its debt as it can simply print money to pay for it.

This is a version of the Keynesian approach of using government debt to generate demand in the economy. Rightly, it rejects the obsession with avoiding government “debt and deficits” and it rejects the cuts and austerity that go with the idea pushed by the Coalition that getting the budget “back in black” is proof of good economic management.

One problem is that, if done on a large enough scale, printing money creates inflation.

Supporters of MMT largely accept this, but argue that a government faced with this problem could use other tools, such as increasing taxes or interest rates, to reduce economic demand. But this, as Marxist economist Michael Roberts puts it, is just another form of, “traditional Keynesian macro management”.

It rests on the Keynesian assumption that economic crises and recessions are a result of the lack of “effective demand”. The solution then is for governments to generate demand themselves.

But, this misdiagnoses the cause of capitalist crises. The underlying problem is a tendency inside capitalism that Marx identified—the declining rate of profit. Capitalists will only invest it they think they can make sufficient profit. And the bulk of investment capital is in private hands. Business investment is three times larger than government investment in Australia, amounting to around 15 per cent of GDP annually. And they control huge stocks of investment accumulated over time.

The injection of trillions in new money into the system by central banks since 2007 has failed to generate growth. The injection of trillions in new money into the system by central banks through quantitative easing since 2007 has failed to generate healthy growth rates. It has been unable to restore the system to anything like the growth experienced in the post-war boom of the 1950s and 1960s. Instead we have seen the weakest period of recovery from any recession since the Second World War.

Underlying that is weak investment in expanding production in the real economy, as opposed to the stockmarket and financial assets. As Marxist economist Michael Roberts has shown, “As a share of GDP, investment in the major economies is some 25-30 per cent lower than before the Great Recession.”

Keynesian policies failed during the major economic crisis of the mid-1970s too, when increasing government spending not only failed to stop mass unemployment but saw a surge in inflation, which reached 17.5 per cent in Australia.

It was only through attacking trade union power to allow wage cuts and a ratcheting-up of workers’ exploitation that capitalism was eventually able to recover.

One of the reasons the idea of MMT appeals to people is that it avoids any confrontation with big business or the wealthy. It appears to be a way that governments can create jobs and economic growth with little effort.

The money to fund the jobs and socially useful spending that we need is there, but it will have to be taken out of the hands of the billionaires and massive corporations. Funding the spending we need requires taxing the rich and ultimately, seizing their wealth.

Governments may be able to prop up their economies for a period. But business always looks to cut wages and workers’ conditions in a desperate scramble to boost profits in response to the slump.

Workers need to fight every effort to make us pay the price of capitalism’s crisis. The real problems are structured into the capitalist system itself. The only solution is to overthrow it.
FEATURES

STRIKES IN A TIME OF PANDEMIC: THE SEAFARERS’ STRIKE OF 1919

As the Spanish flu pandemic hit Australia, seafarers began an epic three-month strike that defied the courts and won a pay rise and the first ever sick pay, writes Ian Rintoul.

Almost exactly 101 years ago, the first great pandemic of the twentieth century struck Australia. In 1919, the Spanish flu, as it was called (although it almost certainly originated among US soldiers who then took it to Europe) broke through Australia’s maritime quarantine. These restrictions had been imposed in October 1918, as the flu swept the rest of the world.

The first recorded case was on 9 or 10 January in Melbourne. By 21 January the flu was in Sydney. On 29 January, the Queensland border was closed, but by 3 May, the flu was in Brisbane among laundry workers at Kangaroo Point.

Globally, between 50-100 million were killed by the flu, as it spread globally in early 1918, the last year of the First World War, from the US and Europe, and then to Africa, India and Asia by the middle of the year.

Between 1919-20, it is estimated that influenza infected around 15,000 died in Australia. Unlike the coronavirus, the flu disproportionately struck down fit, young adults aged 20-40. A third of the deaths in Australia were of people aged between 25 and 34.

The Spanish flu infected around two million Australians in a population of about five million. In Sydney alone, 40 per cent of residents were infected.

But 1919 was also the year of the biggest strike wave in Australia’s history. There were 460 industrial disputes involving 157,591 workers in which 6,308,226 working days were lost with an estimated loss in wages of £3,961,936.

The biggest strike of 1919 was the Seamen’s Union strike between May and August. While pay and conditions were central to the strike, it was also a strike directly concerned with the risk that influenza posed to seafarers.

The 1919 strike was usually celebrated, for good reasons, as a successful strike against arbitration, the national industrial court system, first established in 1904.

The Commonwealth Arbitration Court was the equivalent to today’s Fair Work Commission, giving power to the state to enforce agreements and impose settlements on industrial disputes that were usually favourable to the employers.

Arbitration was opposed by socialists and bitterly resisted by many unions.

For three months the seamen defied Federal government attempts to force them into arbitration despite the national secretary, Tom Walsh, being jailed in July.

Seafarers were angry that the December 1918 Award, struck by the federal arbitration court, ignored any comparison with the better conditions of other international merchant navies.

The seafarers wanted 14 pounds, plus three shillings for overtime and payment for Sundays at sea. They demanded improvements to the appalling food and accommodation conditions they endured on the ships.

But the Award set wages at just 12 pounds, five shillings. There was also outrage that as soon as the war had ended, the government had reneged on its promise to pay the seafarers a war bonus.

With influenza already claiming lives in the port cities, the seafarers also demanded sick pay, payment for any time a ship was quarantined and life insurance to provide for their families if they were killed by the flu.

On 8 May, an appeal by the Seamen’s Union against the Award was ended by ship owners and the government controller of shipping declaring that there could be no wage increases without a federal investigation. Seafarers in Queensland began walking off the job.

For the first ten days the strike was confined to Queensland, but then spread to New South Wales and Victoria on 20 and 21 May.

Shipping paralysed
Coastal shipping was the main way goods were transported, and the effects of the strike were soon felt.

Coastal shipping was the main way goods were transported in those days, and the effects of the strike were soon being felt across the country.

Many towns, particularly those furthest from the state capitals, began running short of supplies quite quickly.

To get aid to those cities, Queensland union seafarers offered to crew relief ships chartered by Queensland’s Labor government, as long as they were employed under the same conditions that the state government had agreed with the wharf labourers—conditions that included life insurance against influenza and the pay increase the seafarers were demanding.

The Queensland government quickly requisitioned the steamship Allinga which left Brisbane on 21 May with 1000 tons of food and goods for Mackay, Bowen, Townsville and Cairns.

But when the Queensland government asked the Federal government to charter two ships tied up in Brisbane to aid the relief effort, they refused.

Despite the desperate circumstances, the Federal government showed their true colours. They were more determined to break the strike than allow their ships to be crewed under the conditions the Queensland government had agreed to.
As the effects of the strike spread, by 23 May 4000 workers in Victoria were stood down. By the second week of June that number had reached 32,500 (including 8000 women workers, 1300 of them from the confectionary union). Some employers seemed to be deliberately standing other workers down to pressure the seafarers to return to work.

After a compulsory arbitration conference on 29 May, the union reluctantly agreed to a secret ballot on accepting a return to work and the arbitration of outstanding issues.

The ballot was overwhelmingly rejected by a massive vote of over 4000 to 18.

The dispute grew increasingly determined. On 17 June, Brisbane seafarers’ delegates reported to a mass meeting, “If we are pledged, as we deem we now are, to a policy of direct action, we should remove ourselves from the jurisdiction of the Arbitration Court by deregistering the union and resort to the methods which existed prior to our registration. This is the only honest and proper course and the only one open to us at present. With regard to sending the men back to work defeated we will never be party to that.”

On 23 June, around 2000 unemployed workers in Melbourne marched from Trades Hall to the Federal Parliament House (which was then in Melbourne) demanding relief payments.

A week later, after a state Labor MP led a second unemployed march to the office of the Victorian Premier, the Federal and state government each made payments of 1000 pounds for unemployed relief.

In July the conservative Nationalist Federal government (with notorious pro-conscription Billy Hughes as Prime Minister) used section 6 of the Arbitration Act to try and force the Arbitration Court by deregistering the union and removing it from the jurisdiction of the Arbitration Act. But the union’s secretary, Tom Walsh, refused to appear. He was subsequently fined 200 pounds in the Magistrates Court.

The seafarers fought for sick pay for seamen to return to work. As discussions over the final details dragged on, some of the union branch meetings expressed their concerns that Walsh was still in jail and that the agreement made no reference to the future role of the arbitration commission.

On 25 August, the Sydney branch voted 3000 to 26 to accept the government’s offer. The next day Brisbane and Melbourne voted for an immediate return to work.

Wages were increased 35 shillings a month above the 1918 award; leave arrangements were improved, sick seamen were paid until they arrived in their home port.

It wasn’t until 1935 that one week’s sick pay was introduced into other industrial awards.

The owners agreed to provide bedding (without sheets) and improve what had been disgusting accommodation conditions. Of all the original demands, however, life insurance and reduced hours were not won.

Walsh was released from jail in September.

While the seafarers went back to work, the other great strike in 1919, of Broken Hill miners that had also begun in May, did not end until November 1920.

While flu ravaged Broken Hill, the miners’ 18 month struggle won the first 35 hour week in Australia and major improvements in health and safety, in a dangerous industry where accidents, lead poisoning and dusted lungs had sent many miners to an early grave, as certainly as the flu. But that’s another story.

In 1919, just like today, the issues of health and class were interlocked.

The seafarers fought for sick pay against bosses and a government that were more concerned with maintaining their profits than with workers’ lives.

In 2020, in many industries, workers are faced with bosses and the government denying them the paid time off needed to keep workers and the wider community safe from COVID-19.

Workers organised by the United Workers Union have been forced to walk off the job to get proper safety measures in warehouses running at full tilt to keep the supermarkets stocked. The industrial power seafarers used in the bitter struggle of 1919, will be needed again.
FEATURES

CORONAVIRUS AND CAPITALISM

BIG PHARMA’S ADDICTION TO PROFIT

As the coronavirus spreads around the world, David Glanz looks at how capitalism and the corporate control of medicine means profit comes before public health.

THE RACE to create a COVID-19 vaccine is the new gold rush. Around the world, more than 60 pharmaceutical companies are going flat out to be the first to market.


The global crisis, “will potentially be a blockbuster for the industry in terms of sales and profits,” he said, adding that, “the worse the pandemic gets, the higher their eventual profit.”

Johnson & Johnson says it will invest $US1 billion ($1.6 billion) to create enough manufacturing capacity to make more than one billion doses of a vaccine it is testing.

Shares in another company, Moderna, rose 10 per cent even as the share market dropped 12 per cent. Moderna is working on a vaccine that hopes will both prevent and cure the virus.

As one business writer mused, if the company prices its vaccine at $600, and half the population of China alone received it, Moderna would earn $37.1 billion.

The drive for profit motivates business, as Karl Marx noted in Capital, quoting economist T.J. Dunning: “With adequate profit, capital is very bold … 50 per cent, positive audacity; 100 per cent will make it ready to trample on all human laws; 300 per cent, and there is not a crime at which it will scruple, nor a risk it will not run, even to the chance of its owner being hanged.”

Supporters of capitalism say it is that hunt for profit which leads to innovation. But it can also lead to chaos. The US Food and Drug Administration reported that at the height of the pandemic in China, pharmaceutical companies were having trouble sourcing components from there, threatening the US supply of antibiotics such as amoxicillin, doxycycline and penicillin.

When the epicentre of the pandemic moved to Europe and then the US, governments turned on each other. Masks heading to France from Shanghai were on a plane ready to take off when US buyers turned up and offered three times the French price. Soon after, the French government did the same with a consignment heading for Scandinavia.

As Jonathan Quick of Duke University in North Carolina, author of The End of Epidemics, said: “Virus biology and vaccines technology could be the limiting factors [to COVID-19], but politics and economics are far more likely to be the barrier to immunisation.”

Neo-liberal priorities can also hamper basic research. The CSIRO operates the Australian Animal Health Laboratory in Geelong, one of only a handful of Biosecurity Level 4 labs in the world able to do research on dangerous pathogens.

The CSIRO has used the facilities to research bird flu, SARS and the Hendra virus.

Yet at the height of the ebola crisis in 2014 in west Africa, the Liberals cut $111 million from CSIRO funding, including Geelong.

Now Australia is affected by COVID-19, the Liberals have changed their tune, announcing $220 million to upgrade the Geelong laboratories, where scientists are working on two vaccines.

But it will be two years before the upgrade can take place.

The biggest problem with leaving our health in the hands of the profit motive is that Big Pharma goes only where profits are to be found. And it will subvert and twist the science to that end.

The industry uses its wealth to sponsor and conduct drug trials, often suppressing the publication of negative results and even subverting the publication of papers in academic journals, buying favours, employing ghost writers of academic papers and sometimes engaging in outright fraud.

Ben Goldacre, author of Bad Pharma, writes that if a large part of the trial data is unavailable, no one can check the validity of the conclusions drawn. Yet GPs have to rely on this data when they prescribe medicines.

Goldacre shows that the bias towards positive results is higher by a factor of almost two thirds in research funded by industry.

The global pharmaceutical industry grosses $US600 billion a year but while its profits are private, it’s happy to take public money along the way.

The Johnson & Johnson initiative mentioned above is underpinned by $US421 million from the US government.

Since the 1930s, the US National Institutes of Health has put $US900 billion into research that drug companies used to patent brand-name medications.

Every drug approved by the US Food and Drug Administration between 2010 and 2016 involved science funded with $100 billion in tax dollars through the NIH.

Among the drugs developed with some public funding that went on to be huge earners for private companies are the HIV drug AZT and the cancer treatment Kymriah, which Novartis
The drive for profit means corporations pick and choose which drugs they support. Their favourites are those that treat persistent conditions like arthritis or blood pressure among people in the industrialised countries because these give a consistent flow of profits.

The companies also focus on “me-too” drugs, which are minor variations on existing products, so they can continue exploiting drug patents and high prices.

Viruses are not good for business. They are constantly mutating, so companies may not be able to make back the money spent developing them.

Two other dangerous coronaviruses emerged earlier this century—SARS in China in 2002-04 and MERS in Saudi Arabia in 2012. In both cases, work began on vaccines before being shelved when the outbreaks were contained.

Professor Nikolai Petrovsky from Flinders University was given funding by the NIH in 2004 to develop a vaccine for SARS.

But with the outbreak contained, funding was cut off just as his laboratory was about to test a vaccine. “It wasn’t a lot of money. We were so close,” Petrovsky said. With tweaks, that vaccine might now have been effective against COVID-19.

Big Pharma has also turned its back on developing new antibiotics because they are not profitable enough. The growing threat of “superbugs” means such new antibiotics are badly needed.

Antibiotics are estimated to add 10 to 20 years on average to global life expectancy but most people take antibiotics for a very short period, making them much less attractive as an investment compared to drugs that treat chronic conditions.

Profitability holds back research into diseases that primarily affect the Global South.

An ebola vaccine was developed by publicly-funded researchers by 2003 but there was no interest from pharmaceutical companies in funding clinical trials.

It was only after a major epidemic in west Africa in 2014, and growing political pressure, that a US pharmaceutical company, Merck, agreed to do so.

Nineteen countries in sub-Saharan Africa and India record almost 85 per cent of global malaria cases, with six countries accounting for more than half: Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Uganda, Côte d’Ivoire, Mozambique and Niger.

In 2018, there were 405,000 deaths from malaria, two thirds children under five years old.

The World Health Organization reckons $US5 billion is needed each year for malaria control and elimination, yet in 2018 just $US2.7 billion was spent, down from $US3.2 billion in 2017.

Meanwhile, in 2013, US pharmaceutical companies spent $US40 billion on R&D inside the US.

Global South
It is the countries ravaged by imperialism where the threat of COVID-19 is most pronounced. South African hospitals have fewer than 1000 intensive care unit beds for a population of 56 million. In Zimbabwe, the capital Harare’s infectious diseases hospital has zero ICU beds.

Two French doctors had an earnest discussion on TV recently about why Africa was the best place to test a virus-specifically because it has a negligible health system.

In Syria, in the country’s north-east, there are only ten adult ventilators for two million people.

In northwestern Syria, Idlib, which has a population of four million—including one million who were internally displaced recently—there are only three fully-equipped hospitals.

Doctors estimate that more than 100,000 people could die of COVID-19 in Idlib province alone.

The top ten pharmaceutical companies made a total of $US150 billion profit in 2019. Socialists believe that health cannot be left in their hands.

A socialist system would orient drugs research into cures and innovative treatments, delivered effectively and efficiently in the interests of ordinary people.

Drug patents and the restriction of medical knowledge would be outlawed. All research and trial results should be open access, with duplicate research eliminated.

Where Big Pharma sees dollar signs and competition, socialists argue for cooperation and the primacy of human need.
Refugees in detention centres across the country are continuing their resistance, calling for their immediate release amid the threat of COVID-19 infection. Their calls are backed by the advice of over 1100 doctors in a letter to Peter Dutton in early April, warning of dire consequences if the virus were to spread inside detention.

Over 200 immigration detainees began a hunger strike on 9 April in Villawood detention centre in Sydney, along with some others in Brisbane. Their demands covered testing, protective equipment and faster processing of immigration applications.

A rooftop protest began shortly after in Blaxland compound in Villawood, with three detainees holding banners calling for their freedom. The protest continued for five days before armed police entered the compound, ending the protest and transferring all detainees from Blaxland to another compound inside the main detention centre.

Meanwhile, rooftop protest had spread to the Melbourne Immigration Transit Accommodation (MITA) in Melbourne, where a detainee also took to the roof to call for freedom.

Daily protests are also continuing inside the Mantra Hotel in Melbourne and the Kangaroo Point Hotel in Brisbane, “Alternate Places of Detention” where refugees are being held after having been transferred to Australia for medical treatment from Manus and Nauru.

Reports from inside the hotels tell of the impossibility of maintaining social distancing in the cramped conditions with large numbers of staff coming in and out every day, increasing the risk of bringing the virus with them. Many of the detainees already suffer from diabetes, asthma, kidney and heart conditions, making them particularly vulnerable to the virus.

The refugees in Mantra have conducted protests with placards pressed against the windows, and photo actions in the hallways. In Kangaroo Point hotel, which holds around 110 refugees (and is now fenced and totally controlled by Border Force) there are daily protests on the balconies in view of the street.

On 17 April, in defiance of police restrictions on leaving the house, Brisbane refugee supporters walked, jogged and cycled outside Kangaroo Point in solidarity and sight of the refugees protesting on the balcony.

As Solidarity goes to press, another exercise protest outside Kangaroo Point is planned for Friday 24 April.

For many, the current situation is an extension of the cruelty of seven years in detention offshore. A Kangaroo Point refugee speaking via Zoom told refugee supporters, “The government doesn’t care about us. This has been proven for us a long time ago on Manus and Nauru. But now it’s just another level”. 

Unsafe

Now held inside their rooms in Mantra for 23 hours a day, the mental and physical health of the refugees deteriorates day by day.

Queensland Premier Annastacia Palaszczuk promised to raise the problems with safety at Kangaroo Point with the federal government, commenting, “I’m not happy with the situation.”

Despite the consistent evidence of the unsafe conditions, Dutton and Morrison maintain the lie that there are, “measures in place in detention facilities in line with advice from the Department of Health.”

The UK, Spain, Belgium, and even the US, have released some people from immigration detention because of terrible risk in the, “unique circumstances of the coronavirus outbreak”.

Over 50,000 people have now signed the Human Rights For All petition calling for the release of immigration detainees. The first court challenge to the government’s detention of a refugee amidst the risk of COVID-19 infection has been lodged in the High Court.

Meanwhile, Trump’s complete ban on migration into the US has all but ended the prospects of US resettlement for those refugees still waiting in Nauru and in Port Moresby, where refugees are now locked down in a state of emergency.

The government’s shameful neglect of people in detention centres reveals the gaping hole in Scott Morrison’s claim that “we are all in this together”. The COVID risk makes it more important that we step up the protests to “Free The Refugees”.

By Matilda Fay

Above: Refugees protest at the Kangaroo Point hotel in Brisbane where 110 of them are imprisoned

Held inside their rooms in Mantra for 23 hours a day, their mental and physical health deteriorates day by day