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Martin Scott
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Australian unions promote slashing of COVID-19 health measures

As COVID-19 infections, hospitalisations and deaths mount, the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) has stepped up its collaboration with employers to keep workers on the job, even if they are ill or potentially infectious.



ACTU secretary Sally McManus [Credit: actu.org.au]

Continuing its pro-business record throughout the pandemic, the ACTU has not issued a single statement calling for public health measures to protect workers, despite the disaster fuelled by the highly-transmissible Omicron mutation.

Instead, the peak union body has thrown its full support behind the big business demand, now adopted by the bipartisan “National Cabinet,” to shift from free, public polymerase chain reaction (PCR) testing to less accurate rapid antigen tests (RATs).

ACTU president Michele O’Neil yesterday emphasised: “Unions and businesses have been calling on the Morrison Government to provide free rapid antigen testing since October.”

Speaking about the National Cabinet’s redefinition of “close contacts,” which is specifically designed to exclude workplace exposures, O’Neil said, “we understand the change in the definition, but there’s a lot of confusion about workplaces.”

The only “confusion” that O’Neil wants to clear up is how far the unions can go in working with employers to push worried or potentially-infected workers into workplaces.

In October, the ACTU, Transport Workers Union (TWU) and a host of industry lobbyists issued a joint statement calling for a publicly-funded program to supply RATs to businesses.

The statement made clear that the purpose of this was to avoid “unnecessary snap closures” in “a new phase of living with the virus.”

“Should a state have to reimpose restrictions again in the future,” the statement continued, “the cost to the economy would be devastating.”

In other words, Australia’s peak union body stated its clear opposition to lockdowns, border closures, mask mandates and all other public health measures to protect workers and the general public from the COVID-19 threat.

In lockstep with industry, the ACTU demanded there must be no impediment to the continued profit-making operations of business.

In order to avoid the disruption caused by employees being unable to work while isolating or awaiting PCR test results, the ACTU demanded that rapid, less reliable tests must be made available, at no cost to business.

This is just the latest example of the pro-employer role played by the ACTU and all the unions throughout the pandemic.

In March 2020, as soon as the pandemic hit, the ACTU was intimately involved in crafting the Liberal-National Coalition government's JobKeeper wage subsidy. The chief purpose of this scheme was to hand billions of dollars to big business, regardless of subsequent profitability. In addition, it gave employers unprecedented powers to slash workers' hours and change their duties to avoid paying them more than the meagre \$750 per week subsidy.

ACTU secretary Sally McManus declared on national television that unions were telling employers: "You can get everything you want through co-operation and by doing it through the way that we've already demonstrated that we can."

This statement was a clear promise to big business that the unions were ready to carry out every ruling class demand in exploiting the pandemic to deepen the decades-long assault on the jobs and conditions of workers.

The pro-business orientation of the union was exposed by the warm reception it received from the highest levels of the capitalist elite.

It was no wonder that then Industrial Relations Minister and Attorney-General Christian Porter, described McManus as his "best friend forever." Business Council of Australia CEO Jennifer Westacott said: "I really commend the ACTU for the cooperative way that they've looked at some of these big awards and given some of the flexibility that employers have wanted."

In numerous workplaces, including all the major trucking companies, enterprise bargaining was immediately postponed for 12 months, freezing the wages of workers and preventing them from striking.

Under Australia's draconian "Fair Work" industrial relations laws, introduced by the Labor Party and faithfully enforced by the unions, workers are prohibited from taking industrial action except during enterprise agreement negotiations.

At Australia Post, the Communications, Electrical and Plumbing Union struck a deal with management to impose the Alternative Delivery Model (ADM), a complete restructuring of the company's delivery operations to drive up workloads. The union-management agreement included a 12-month no-strike clause.

The falsity of the claim that the ADM had anything whatsoever to do with protecting workers' health in the pandemic was exposed by the fact that management and the union also colluded to keep postal workers in the dark about coronavirus infections throughout Australia Post.

Likewise, in the schools, the education unions have worked intensively to suppress demands by teachers and parents for school closures to protect staff and students from COVID.

Another revealing example of the unions' role came in July this year. As the Delta variant ravaged New South Wales, the then premier, Gladys Berejiklian, announced new measures that would have restricted residents of the worst-affected working class areas of Sydney from attending work.

Within hours, unions and industry groups joined forces to demand the restrictions be retracted. The state government acceded, construction and other worksites reopened fully and profits continued, while hundreds more NSW residents died.

In contrast to the swift action of the unions against safety measures in July, they have remained utterly silent amid the opening of borders and ending of public health measures, carried out in virtually every state and territory in recent weeks as infections surge far past previous record highs.

None of this dismantling of essential safety precautions by Liberal-National and Labor Party governments alike would be possible without the collaboration of the unions. They are stepping up their efforts to stifle resistance and opposition throughout the working class, including the frontline health workers.

Health Services Union secretary Gerard Hayes welcomed the decision by the NSW Liberal-National government to slash the isolation time for health workers from two weeks to seven days, provided they return a negative PCR test. This must be a clear

warning. The unions will help force health workers back into hospitals and other public health facilities while still potentially infectious, endangering the lives of patients, as well as themselves.

The utter disregard by the unions for the health and lives of workers and their families underscores their complete agreement with the “let it rip” reopening agenda of government and big business. This is taking to a new deadly level the unions’ transformation into the industrial police of the corporate elite.

For decades the unions have been the chief enforcers of the profit demands of Australian-based corporations. The ACTU has been at the forefront of this pro-market agenda since its close collaboration with the Hawke-Keating Labor governments of the 1980s and 1990s in imposing the Prices and Incomes Accords and enterprise bargaining system that have formed the basis of the intensifying offensive against the working class.

Shock and outrage is developing among working people to the naked subordination of their health, safety and lives to the profit requirements of the capitalist class. However, for that opposition to succeed, workers need to make a conscious break with the thoroughly corporatist union organisations and take matters into their own hands. That means forming rank-and-file committees in every workplace and fighting for the global elimination of the COVID-19 virus and the socialist reorganisation of society on the basis of human need, not billionaire profits.

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