

Australia: Unions need to crush the anti-vax movement

Thursday 23 September 2021, by [O'SHEA Louise](#) (Date first published: 23 September 2021).



CFMEU officials attempt to guard the union's office during an attack by anti-vax protesters (including many CFMEU members) on Monday 20 September

In a frightening show of force, marauding fascist mobs have taken over the streets of Melbourne for three days running. They have smashed up union offices and occupied major arterials for hours. This is a disastrous development.

The protests have attracted thousands of people, mostly men, largely from construction and other blue-collar industries. Small construction operators, workers—some union and others non-union—and far-right activists have united to give the impression that their movement is a rank-and-file upsurge of workers against authority.

But at the same time—and in some cases a mere stone's throw away—thousands of workers in hospital wards, supermarkets and distribution centres across the city were working to keep people alive in the face of a deadly pandemic. Thousands more were staying at home, foregoing income, to protect others from the virus. In their overwhelming majority, these and other workers have complied with health orders and queued up to get vaccinated, rightly recognising it as a basic act of social solidarity.

The protesters have contempt for such solidarity and the actual working class. They deride those who respect health measures as “sheeple”. They see life-saving health measures as an unbearable incursion on their personal freedom. On Monday, they smashed up the offices of the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union which they blame, along with the state government, for the introduction of a vaccine mandate in the construction industry. Opposition to vaccination, mandated or otherwise, has been the key uniting theme of their actions, but it's not limited to this. They are hostile to the COVID-19 control effort in general, seeing it as a manifestation of tyrannical government power akin to communism.

On this, they are taking a cue from the mainstream and far right. Their protest was attended by Liberal Democrat state MP David Limbrick, a far-right free-marketeer who thinks COVID-19 should be treated like the flu and describes efforts to keep it out of Victoria as “absurd”. These anti-human views are shared by the likes of far-right politicians Pauline Hanson and George Christenson, as well as much of the mainstream Liberal party.

While Morrison and his parliamentary and business allies are happy to champion vaccination as their

ticket to returning to unfettered business-as-usual, others are unable to break from the hostility to far-reaching public health measures that has been the political instinct of Liberal governments throughout the pandemic, even if they haven't always been able to act on it. The sense of collective responsibility and the social solidarity health measures depend on for their success is simply too much for those who prioritise above all else their individual liberties and the rights of small businesses owners.

For its part, the far-right movement outside of parliament has recognised an opportunity in the COVID-19 crisis, first in opposing lockdowns and more recently in stoking suspicion towards vaccines and vaccine mandates. They have attempted to connect paranoid, conspiracy-style politics with individualist anti-authoritarianism and distrust of bosses and government, with some success. Despite attracting very little mainstream support—even the Murdoch press has kept a distance since the anti-vax message has come to the fore—the right-wing rallies against COVID-19 measures have been well-attended and determined. The current round represents a serious upping of the ante, and is an ominous sign for the future.

Insofar as unionised workers are involved and influenced by this madness, some blame must be directed at the union leadership. It has both capitulated to existing anti-vax sentiment inside the union and created room for it to take hold where it didn't already exist. The union's failure to endorse the vaccine mandate, and its tendency to apologise for vaccine refusers, has contributed to construction workers having the highest rates of vaccine hesitancy in the country. The Melbourne Institute's "Taking the Pulse of the Nation" survey from the second week of September found that one in three construction workers were unwilling or unsure about getting vaccinated—the highest level of hesitancy of any industry.

This is not a recent development. From the very beginning of the pandemic, the union's priority has been to keep the industry open, which has inevitably fostered a certain hostility to health measures. As early as March 2020, four of the union's most senior officials met with the Master Builders Association to discuss how the industry could remain open while other inessential activities were being curtailed. This collaboration resulted in a joint submission to the state government outlining a plan for the industry to operate through the pandemic.

In contrast to the union's usual prioritisation of safety on the job, this involved risking the health of its own members, and the broader community, for the sake of the construction industry's profits and its members weekly pay cheque. This stance encouraged an attitude in construction that COVID-19 measures were an unacceptable threat to livelihoods that should be treated with scepticism, an attitude which, in some quarters at least, has only hardened over time.

It has been the same story of class collaboration and anti-social recklessness in subsequent lockdowns. Talking to journalist Ben Schneiders, Master Builders Association CEO Rebecca Casson summed up the pandemic-era relationship: "Fair play to John [Setka, the construction union state secretary], it was the first time in history we've got that level of trust, and it enabled us to be agile and to do things that no other industry was able to". That is, maintain operations at all costs. The message all this sent to construction workers: your pay comes first, not the collective good. It's no wonder then that the far right, with its COVID-scepticism and hostility to public health measures it regards as an unacceptable incursion by the state on personal freedom, could get more of a hearing here than in other industries.

This also reflects the erosion of left-wing political traditions in one of the country's most militant unions. Genuine class consciousness is not about defending an industry or individual pay cheques above all else. It is about standing up for the interests of the class as a whole, which requires an appreciation of the broader social context. If this means staying home to keep everyone safe, then

necessary measures to facilitate this, like full pandemic leave pay, are what workers should fight for. Allying themselves with the boss to ensure the profits keep rolling in is not anti-authoritarian, it is backward, reckless sectionalism. And it is an insult to the thousands of health workers and other essential workers who bear the brunt of such recklessness.

And while Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews has not held back condemning the fascist mob, his government has capitulated to construction industry exceptionalism too. It was reluctant to act when construction bosses openly defied restrictions during the current Delta lockdown, causing construction sites to become significant sites of COVID-19 spread. In a recent blitz, authorised WorkSafe officers have reported finding more than 70 percent of sites to be non-compliant with health orders. And this was in the context of weaker restrictions, which themselves were the result of Andrews' unwillingness to stand up to the bosses' anti-lockdown ire, even in the face of a more infectious strain of the virus.

All of which means that the government is now facing concerted opposition to its vaccine mandate. This opposition needs to be smashed and the mandate upheld. For the fascist mob to establish their selfish, anti-social positions as legitimate would be a disaster. The fascist right has had a show of strength and demonstrated a capacity to use the pandemic to draw support. While it represents a tiny minority of the overall population, as well as of the 300,000-strong construction workforce, the protesters nevertheless are a force that needs to be countered.

It is positive that other unions, particularly health workers, have condemned the protests and that there has been widespread derision towards participants. When and where possible, these sentiments must be turned into action as a matter of urgency and the full power of the union movement mobilised to uphold the principles of solidarity and respect for human life.

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P.S.

- Red Flag. 23 September 2021:
<https://redflag.org.au/article/unions-need-crush-anti-vax-movement>

Red Flag is the publication of Socialist Alternative.