

Roundtable Summary – Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU)

Date: Friday 14 June 2024

Host: Dr Angela Jackson, Panel Member and Robyn Kruk AO, Panel Chair, Commonwealth Government COVID-19 Response Inquiry

Participants: This roundtable brought together representatives from a range of ACTU affiliated unions.

Purpose of this roundtable

- This roundtable provided representatives from ACTU affiliated unions across different industries with the opportunity to reflect on what worked well during the pandemic and what could improve preparedness for a future pandemic.
- The COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted the workforce, with changes to workplace relations and workplace health and safety arrangements.
- There are lessons to be learnt on how economic and health measures affect the workforce and how engagement between unions, businesses and governments could be conducted in a future crisis.

What we heard at the roundtable

- Establishing effective multi-stakeholder engagement took time early in the pandemic due to weak existing tripartite arrangements. More could be done to build and maintain these arrangements to ensure key parties can come together quickly in a crisis.
- There was a significant tension between employers' desire to keep their business running to minimise financial harm and the health of their employees throughout the pandemic. This was particularly pronounced in the early stages.
- Legislation and codes have more impact in protecting people in the workplace than guidance because there are consequences for not complying. If there was another pandemic there have not yet been any structural changes that would suggest a different outcome for workers. Unions proposed that there should be a regulation covering biological hazards as well as either a regulation or Code of Practice that provides guidance on biological hazards and ventilation/indoor air quality.
- When responding to a pandemic workplace relations and work health and safety are inextricably linked.

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- Australia's sophisticated workplace health and safety system was effectively sidelined in favour of public health measures which were harder to finesse and effectively operationalise. The workplace health and safety system could have been used more effectively to manage risks.
- There is a need for public health decision-making across government to have a stronger understanding of how public health orders and other restrictions impact workers in different industries. It was difficult for workers to navigate public health orders and directions, and there was no clear channel for workers and unions to feed into how the pandemic was managed in their sector and provide advice on how best to implement the public health objectives in different workplaces.
- The primary focus of economic support should be maintaining the relationship between employer and employee to avoid needing to find new jobs after the crisis.
- The eligibility requirements of economic support measures such as JobKeeper provided an incentive for some employers to structure their business to ensure eligibility. In some reported instances, this included standing down workers when not economically justified. Further, challenges arose through giving employers the choice over which employees remained at work, while others were paid to stay home.
- We should develop a ready-made package of economic supports now so that it is ready to activate in a health emergency. The time spent to stand up supports during COVID allowed the pandemic to spread further and faster than it might have otherwise. Access should be simple so that people don't have to apply for different support through different channels.
- Throughout the pandemic, there were high expectations placed on low-paid and vulnerable workers, who often worked in settings with greater risks of contracting COVID-19. This risk was not appreciated and those who were required to test negative to attend work, largely had to do so in their own time. Additionally, many workers did not have access to appropriate PPE (such as N95 masks for women) nor appropriate training on the correct use of it.
- Insecure work was a vector for transmission, but paid pandemic leave helped to normalise individuals staying at home when they were sick to prevent the spread of infection to other workers.
- Unions were guided by medical experts and advice in relation to vaccine mandates. A centralised voice on vaccine guidance would have reduced confusion and the spread of misinformation.