

Thinking Through Vaccine Mandates

Black Flag Sydney

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Contents

Vaccines and anti-vaxxers	3
Where do anti-vaxxers come from?	4
Critical theory, critical action	5
We can't rely on the boss for our health and safety	7

The recent anti-vaccine protests in Melbourne have forced the issue of “no jab, no job” to the front of everyone’s minds. Virtually all unions have expressed a position against mandatory vaccinations, whilst also being firmly in favour of voluntary vaccinations generally. However, it is unclear whether the unions will actually put their foot down on the issue; the Vic-Tas branch of the Construction Forestry Maritime Manufacturing and Energy Union (CFMMEU) construction division was targeted by a number of irate construction workers and anti-vaxxers because they were perceived as not doing enough to stop the mandates. Some unions may now take harder stances on the matter in order to undercut any similar “rebellions” from their own members.

What position should working-class militants take in regards to vaccine mandates? It’s not an easy question, but with this article we hope to clarify a few things and point to a way forward. We appreciate all feedback, and in particular encourage any international readers to offer their thoughts; we know that this issue and others like it – such as Macron’s “vaccine passport” scheme in France – have provoked much discussion on the left all over the world.

Vaccines and anti-vaxxers

To get what should be obvious out of the way: vaccines are an objective good, and should be taken up by as large a section of the working-class as possible. All vaccines on offer in Australia are entirely safe. The tiny risk of suffering negative side effects is getting even tinier, as their symptoms become more widely known and as medical staff improve their ability to treat them.

The increasing presence of alternatives like Pfizer, which have fewer side effects, also proves that there is no real reason not to get vaccinated. The “religious reasons” to not take the vaccine are all unadulterated bullshit. Short of having one of a small number of very specific medical conditions, there is no good reason for an adult to not have the vaccine. As vaccination rates in New South Wales move past 80% first-dose and even 90% first-dose in a number of areas, it is clear that the absolute majority of people agree. Once you discount people who cannot yet access the vaccine – such as those in a number of regional areas with inadequate healthcare infrastructure, a group that includes disproportionate numbers of Indigenous people – it becomes abundantly obvious that only a small minority of people would refuse to take the vaccine at all.

But – and there is always a but, unfortunately – that minority does exist. It can’t simply be written off. Even if one has a heartless “let them die” mindset, a healthcare system clogged with dying idiots would be good for nobody. The spread the unvaccinated would be responsible for would also harm the population at large, since the risk of death among vaccinated people is still serious, however diminished it may be.

The problem for socialists comes with the way in which the “pro-vaccine” position is expressed. What seems like a binary is presented in front of us: do we line up with the politicians and managers forcing employees to get vaccinated at the threat of the sack, or do we stand alongside lunatics and demand our free right to spread a deadly virus in our workplaces?

As socialists, we naturally hate the idea of giving employers any extra ability to fire people. As anarchists, we naturally hate the government forcing working-class people to do things against their will. The expansion in police powers during COVID-19 has been a disaster, and the implementation of vaccine mandates can justifiably be seen as a key part of the ruling class’ strategy to pull itself out of the crisis, whilst leaving its rotten system intact. Vaccine mandates have only

been implemented in construction as part of a gambit to keep this mostly non-essential industry open. It makes sense to resent mandates on these grounds.

This sick system gave birth to COVID in the first place, and will undoubtedly give birth to more pandemics in the future: why should we let it off the hook by putting fringe anti-vaxxers in the firing line instead? In such a case, we are simply doing the state's bidding; the fact that the mandates are only being deployed as a measure to hasten a reckless, still-deadly opening up of the economy is masked over.

However, as human beings, we have also a vested interest in not dying. We naturally detest conspiracy theories. The anti-vaxx side of politics is right-wing for a reason: it's broadly the political stance of the anti-lockdown bourgeoisie, both small and large, who want more than anything to return to the kinds of profit-making the lockdowns have impeded. That such recklessness might lead to mass death is neither here nor there. The political expression of this sector verges on fascism. Allied with them are all sorts of general fanatics, from rogue pastors to naturopaths to disbarred lawyers to snake oil salesmen.

The binary plays into the hands of the state, which for the moment wishes to put itself forward as the embodiment of reason, science and medicine against the conspiracy theorists and science-deniers. The anti-vaxxers are blamed for endangering people's lives, and the police are celebrated for using violence to stop them. The shallowness of such a viewpoint is demonstrated by the fact that the armed, would-be representatives of science and reason – the cops – are themselves more anti-vaccine than most people. The Queensland Police Force is preparing for the possibility of up to 10% of its workforce being stood down for refusing to get vaccinated.

It's essential for us to break down the false binary, not just as an abstract theoretical position, but in practical terms too: we have to find a different way of operating. Can we retain our basic antagonism to the ruling class, whilst also maintaining a commitment to basic health and safety? The answer, to us, is a firm yes – but it requires shifting gears.

Where do anti-vaxxers come from?

Dealing with the problem of anti-vaxxers means attempting to understand the social basis of anti-vaccine ideas. Such an attempt can have nothing to do with the notion put forward by some, that anti-vaccination ideas are simply the fault of ignorance and a lack of education, or the influence of malignant media figures.

It's useless to merely describe the viewpoint as stupid and the adherents to it as morons; it may be accurate, but it solves no problems. In a sense, one is reminded of Marx's quip that he didn't care so much for the label atheist, for it "reminds one of children, assuring everyone who is ready to listen to them that they are not afraid of the boogeyman". Instead, we have to try and look at the social basis of these ideas, and strike at the root. We don't analyse religion as being the product of ignorance; we identify how it is shaped and perpetuated by the alienated condition of humanity under capitalism. It's the exact same with vaccine opposition.

As mentioned earlier in the article, the class force behind most of the anti-vaxx movement is the bourgeoisie, who seek an unregulated return to profit-making, with minimal interference from the wicked health and safety bureaucrats. Often, they represent the small bourgeoisie, rather than the large – unlike the large businesses that have been able to survive the pandemic and even profit from it (for instance, the major retail and grocery chains), the small business class is often

heavily in debt and on the brink of collapsing into the working-class. They will fight tooth-and-nail to avoid any such prospect.

At the same time, the Melbourne anti-vaccine rallies show that it's not just small businessmen behind this. Although the union heads and the ALP are insistent on declaring the protest a Nazi plot and so on, it's plainly obvious that a large portion of the initial protestors were construction workers themselves. We have to face up to that fact, rather than sidestep it – let alone use it as justification to support the cops' brutal repression tactics.

Some have described the worker contingent to these rallies as being made up primarily of the “individualistic” cowboy types found in the un-unionised residential construction industry, as opposed to the more “collectivist” workers on the bigger union sites. This has a grain of truth to it, but again, it is not the whole picture. Many of the initial protesters at the CFMMEU office were from those big sites.

Instead, we think it's most accurate to situate anti-vaxx ideas among workers as emanating from the class position they hold, and the way capitalism keeps us all in a state of ignorance. Human life under capitalism is fractured. What all this means in terms of science is that under capitalism, medical knowledge is possessed by a specialised class and transmitted down the chain, down a sort of hierarchy. The advice of medical specialists is perceived as coming from above, because it is coming from above. It is perceived this way both by pro-vaccine people who wish to heed the advice of experts, and by anti-vaccine people, who perceive the medical specialists as being “in” on some kind of nefarious elite conspiracy. The only professionals they trust are the discredited ones like Andrew Wakefield. Anti-vaxx ideas, therefore, can be described as a kind of inverted, manipulated resentment of the condition of the working-class and of the forces that repress and exploit it.

There is some academic research that validates the feeling of misplaced rebellion that we get from talking to these anti-vaxx workers. A 2019 study of nurses in France regarding the take up of flu shots showed that resistance to vaccination was intimately tied up with their experience of work:

Positive behavior/intention regarding the influenza vaccine (recent vaccination and/or high future intention) was positively correlated with perceptions of management and negatively correlated with feelings of a psychological contract breach and compassion fatigue.

In other words – the less management was liked, the more they were perceived to be breaching a social contract, and the more overworked the nurses were (“compassion fatigue”), the more likely they were to refuse to take the shot. General resentment towards management, in this case, manifests itself as an unwillingness to get vaccinated; such a thing should not be surprising when it is the management that is compelling their workers to get vaccinated. It should also demonstrate the pointlessness of simply asking anti-vaxxers to abandon their hostility to bureaucrats, managers, politicians, etc. This is particularly the case among social groups with a long history of being targeted by the authorities, like Indigenous people, Arabs, Pacific Islanders, and so on.

Critical theory, critical action

In some sense, this problem resembles racism among workers. Stoked by bourgeois ideologues from the outside, a number of workers may express their alienated condition through racism. What is the response of socialists in these circumstances? Not to support the artificial anti-racism

of management and human relations departments – who only seek to cover up the basis of racism and shift the blame away from themselves – but to agitate among workers. We show how racism doesn't advance the working-class, but holds it back. We fight to break down the structures that solidify racism, like pay differentials between people of different ethnicities. We attack individual racists. We take up anti-racism as the cause that only workers – not rulers – can take seriously and see through to the end.

It is not totally different with anti-vaxxers, and it is for this reason that we oppose vaccine mandates from management – instead, we push for workers to take up the cause themselves, part and parcel of their general independent organisation against the bosses. Just like the presence of racism within the working-class represents a relative failure of unions to deal with it and the conditions that give rise to it, the presence of anti-vaxx ideas represents a relative failure of unions to effectively fight managerialism and capitalism generally. Is it a coincidence that the construction anti-vaxxers arose in a period where the CFMMEU has been more conciliatory to the bosses than ever, working closely with the Master Builders' Association to keep the industry open, without any serious action for safety?

There are a number of creative things that could be done by workers to fight for vaccines, but they can only be done from our standpoint as workers. We could help break down the division of labour between intellectual and manual labour, socialising knowledge by encouraging study circles and research groups to understand COVID-19, its impacts and how best to fight it in our particular industries. We could bridge the gap between scientists and regular workers by inviting doctors, nurses and medical researchers to collaborate on safety plans. We could take the initiative and organise “vaccination tours” of workplaces (the HSU already does this, with reported success). We could take industrial action to secure paid vaccination leave, or even simply demand to be paid to be vaccinated.

The struggle for health and safety is a real fight – bosses won't ever accept these things without being compelled to. That's exactly the point. We'll have to fight, just as around 180 TWU bus drivers at one Sydney depot fought, walking off the job when one coworker tested positive for COVID; they managed to secure the introduction of rapid antigen testing in their industry as a result. Crucially: the TWU does not support vaccine mandates from management.

The battle against COVID-19 has to take the character of a workers' struggle, because COVID-19 and the chaos is itself a manifestation of the rule of the capitalists. The struggle would raise a number of questions that workers can and should take further: why do so many people spend so much time on “non-essential” work, even when it's a danger? Why are we presented with a choice between working dangerously, or going without work and starving? Couldn't there be a better way of organising society?

In terms of vaccines directly, we already know that a large percentage of anti-vaxxers have come to their position as a twisted expression of their resentment towards bosses and politicians. Instead of vaccine mandates being decided by the ruling class, what would occur if they were decided upon freely by workers, without compulsion from above? Solidarity is a powerful thing; we shouldn't underestimate it. Anti-vaxxers are a minority of practically every workplace, so it's unlikely they would win any debate among coworkers in favour of their position.

We can't rely on the boss for our health and safety

In our position paper on New South Wales' Delta outbreak, we said the following:

Mandatory vaccination within workplaces should be determined by rank and file union workers, with full welfare provisions given to workers that won't, or are unable to get vaccinated. We believe full vaccination is in the best interest of all workers, but firmly believe the working class itself should be making the decisions that affect their health and well-being, COVID-19 is not simply a pandemic that's destroying people's lives, but also a state of affairs that is mediated through class relations and contradictions; it goes without saying that in any dispute between the working class and the capitalist class, we side with the working class.

This is our basic point: we believe that militants should be making the case for vaccination in their own workplaces as part of the broader class struggle against the capitalists. In no other way can vaccines seriously be pushed. There is a desire among some leftists to simply state that there is no alternative, to accept vaccine mandates as inevitable and let them through. We understand this, not least of all because we do not wish for people to perceive us as being on the same side as the motley crew of Nazis, anti-vaxxers and dog-kickers.

However, we can see no other way to move forward – any strategy that simply accepts the authority of the ruling class and involves laying down our weapons, even for a second, is one that will never strike at the root cause of all this sickness in the first place: capitalism. Instead of fostering solidarity, coercive measures turn sections of the working-class against each other. That is why we have to say simply that workers should not accept vaccine mandates from their employers, but in every single instance fight like hell so that every one of their coworkers is vaccinated.

Vaccine mandates also present a problem of enforcement when it emanates from the authorities, and not the workers. The enforcing of mandates from above would be done by the police, or apparatuses similar to the police. We've already seen health orders abused by the police over and over again; we've seen them enforced in communities in order to advance goals unrelated to stopping COVID. Think about how cops have been using COVID check-in data to collect evidence on random, unrelated crimes.

There are a number of workers who have struggled to end direct police interference in their work. Sex workers, for example, fought tooth and nail to end police corruption and victimisation in NSW and won decriminalisation as a result. To re-introduce cops as determiners of whether sex workers can work could be a door opening that sends this workforce back decades.

Some have compared the situation of mandates to basic OHS measures, and the fight unions have undertaken to achieve them. After all, would you happily work alongside someone working dangerously, putting themselves and everyone around them in peril? Do you reject workplace safety laws? The truth is, health and safety should be the business of the workers. Institutions like SafeWork NSW aren't there to protect health and safety; they're there to stave off anger at the government by making them seem like the government gives a shit about workplace safety. Anyone familiar with regulatory bodies knows this, and knows how they consistently fail to prevent deaths and serious injury, whilst clearing countless guilty bosses of wrongdoing. Workplace death and injury is something built into capitalist production systems; we can't lean on them to stop it.

We've learned through experience that the less we depend on the government and the bosses for our health and safety and the more we depend on our fellow workers, the better. If someone

is working dangerously, it's up to their coworkers to intervene. If they can't see the error of their ways, and continue to put people in danger, then any preventative measures or "discipline" have to be implemented by the coworkers themselves. Not by the bosses. This is how it works in many workplaces already.

The fight for our lives and the fight against capitalism must be brought together as the same struggle. The only alternative is to pick a side between different factions of the capitalist class. We know that's not an option.

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