

COVID-19 Update: 3 July 2021

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Dear Members,

COVID-19 is back and once again, transport workers are on the frontline. The current outbreak is known the “Delta Variant” and is highly transmissible. We have been informed that this strain of the virus is twice as contagious as the first strain that we suffered through last year.

Already we have seen the difference. This time the Government has made it compulsory to wear masks while inside, on public transport, or in the workplace. QR codes are compulsory everywhere

we go, and the pressure is mounting on the Federal Government to improve the quarantine system and pick up their game on vaccines.

We are still yet to see a comprehensive roll out of the vaccine to all those who wish to have it. This is despite the daily risk of exposure we face around the transport networks, be that train, tram, or bus. Unfortunately, the mixed messaging around which vaccine to get is just adding to the confusion.

For those members working office-based jobs, Transport have sent everyone who can work from outside the office home again. Working from home brings its own set of issues with mental health concerns on the rise, and employers demanding longer hours with no set sign off time.

Early last week, a Guard and Driver from Central were deemed to be close contacts of a positive COVID case and told to immediately proceed home and self-isolate for 14 days. Their train was immediately taken out of service and sent to Auburn for a deep clean. Thankfully both members returned a negative result. However, it did expose flaws in communication channels for COVID incidents. Sydney and NSW Trains failed to advise those around the two members of their proximity to a COVID risk, and theories and rumours about where they had been and who they'd come into contact with ran wild.

Yesterday the union put it to Transport for NSW that it is vitally important to be transparent with all members about when COVID risks occur and who they may affect. In this case, Sydney and NSW Trains should have told all employees in effect areas of the risk, everyone from Station Cleaners, to CSAs to Duty Managers, Guards, Drivers, Crew Support, the list goes on.

At the time of writing, a Station Cleaner has been informed they were a close contact, has been tested, and is isolating. It is vital that Sydney Trains informs all that have worked in the same spaces and alongside this unlucky member so that they can take necessary precautions. This is not the time for secrecy.

Train Crew

Guards at NSW Trains have discovered that their controls and external handrails on crew cabs on the V sets and not being cleaned on a regular basis.

There has also be confusion around where the “Greater Sydney” boundary is and what restrictions apply when trains go beyond that boundary. For example, Bell Station is said to be the western limit, do train crew need wear masks when at Lithgow Station?

Issues have been raised regarding capacity for members in depots and meals rooms. Sydney Trains needs to provide crew with more information on how many members are allowed in meal rooms and what to do if there is no room to be seated when on a crib.

Despite the encouragement of mask wearing and the highly contagious spread of the new strain of COVID-19, Sydney Trains are still placing limits on the number of disposable masks they can obtain. There should be no limit as mask wearing is compulsory, especially for guards.

Crew who are currently off roster or on light duties are still being made to report to work with no suitable duties. These crew should be staying at home instead of being made to sit in depots or meal rooms which reduces capacity for operational crew.

Drivers who are travelling in a crew compartment have been told that they are “safe” and excluded from being considered a close of casual contact. Unfortunately management did not consult with the union and this position does not take into account the increased transmissibility of the virus.

As usual, NSW Trains are deafly quiet when it comes to COVID-19 safety measures.

Freight drivers at Pacific National are being told that, in accordance with the Public Health Order in force, if they travel in and out of the Sydney Area, they are to stay at home until they return the work. This concern is shared by many other train crew members who travel in and out of the Sydney area.

Infrastructure

Infrastructure members are calling for vaccinations to be opened up to all ages. Although not everybody wants the vaccine, there are too many essential workers who are being denied because of age restrictions.

Members at Sydney Trains are still working in the CBD area, unvaccinated, despite the increased risk of the new Delta Variant. There ought to be an attempt by the Government and Transport for NSW to have these workers fast tracked for vaccination.

There have been various issues across both Sydney Trains and the private sector with middle level managers enforcing existing procedures despite the new situation making them impracticable and unsafe. Thankfully, delegates and HSRs have stepped in and rectified most of these issues. If you are still encountering unhelpful posturing by management, report it to your local delegate.

At this stage, the Sydney Trains apprentice rotations are still set to take place on 12 July 2021 as planned. However, the union has been advised that if restrictions are extended, the rotation will be cancelled or delayed.

Earlier this week, major works delegates asked management to allow members to go home if they completed scheduled work early to avoid overcrowding of common spaces. To this time, management have not acceded to this common sense move.

Signallers/Area Controllers

Area Controllers were set to commence their repatriation to the Rail Operations Centre (ROC) after over a year away due to the first outbreak last year. However, due to the emergence of the Delta Variant this has been delayed for indefinite time.

Line Information Control (LIC) Operators have been repatriated to the Disaster Recovery Centres (DRC) which are the old complexes currently occupied by Area Controllers. In the DRCs, a 24/7 COVID cleaner has been engaged.

Transport Officers

Transport Officers have been advised to stay at their home stations and check opal cards in a safe manner. Members have been directed to wear masks whilst at work and have been provided with additional sanitiser and wipes to use on their equipment.

Rail Operations Centre

On the Operations Floor some Network Incident Managers have been relocated to work out of the Belmore DRC and as stated above, LIC Operators have also been relocated. There is a dedicated COVID Cleaner, sanitiser, and wearing masks whilst working is compulsory.

Office workers in the ROC have been encouraged to work from home and in the event they are in the office, they have been instructed to wear masks.

Salaried and Administrative

Crew Support Officers have been told to wear masks in the office and continue to do their important job supporting crew through this trying time.

Other Salary and Administration workers have been encouraged to work from home unless work requirements dictate they have to physically attend work.

Station Staff and Station Cleaners

Delegates representing Station Staff and Station Cleaners have raised serious concerns with their ways of working, particularly the Sydney Trains direction that workers continue to perform their duties in the open customer environment, specifically at HUBs. Station Cleaner delegates also raised the lack of sufficient PPE to protect against this outbreak.

Early last week, a provisional improvement notice (PIN) was placed on the use of HUBs during the outbreak of the Delta Variant. Delegates picked this up and pushed hard for Sydney Trains to allow HUBs to be closed and for Stations Staff to work within a closed room physically away from customers.

On Thursday afternoon, delegates met with senior Sydney Trains management where it was conceded that work could be performed away from the HUBs to keep people safe. Management also agreed to inform any employee that encounters the virus as soon as practicable.

Maintenance Centre Cleaners

Members have once again raised issues with the cleaning chemicals provided by Sydney Trains to ensure that trains are cleaned for use by members and the public. As raised last year, the use of

SAO water is not ideal and thought needs to be put into what the appropriate cleaning substance is during this outbreak.

Given the potential of the virus to make its way onto trains, be it through workers or the travelling public, cleaners need to be informed if their train has been the site of a case, close, or casual contact of COVID-19. Our safety whilst at work is non-negotiable.

Trams and Buses

During this outbreak on our trams and buses, the previous measures fought for by the union remain in force. The first opal reader remains closed off and the “suicide seats” remain taped off. Any bus without signs or tape should be reported immediately.

There are COVID marshals who are policing loading which is currently capped at 25% capacity and green dots are back. Unlike last time, the marshals are actively policing load limits at major terminus points.

Masks are also now mandatory for employees and passengers on trams and buses and at all tram bus stops. This includes buses running special. Police are actively enforcing mask wearing with fines and this includes our members.

STA employees can access 2 hours pay to get vaccinated on their day off or after a shift. This reflects a general push for vaccination as the end game. The union continues to push for transport workers to be prioritised for vaccinations.

Authorised officers are not boarding trams or buses to check tickets.

Members who see any of these measures not in place should report it to their delegate immediately.