

## COVID Update – 4 September 2021

Categories : [COVID19](#)

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As COVID cases continue to rise, over the last week there has been a shift in rhetoric by the NSW Government. In days gone by, we've been told that total case numbers and the number of infectious cases in the community must come down and that's why restrictions need to be in place. Now the Government says nothing can be done and restrictions will only ease once vaccinations rates hit certain levels (70 or 80% depending on the media cycle).

The Public Health Orders (PHO) released last weekend took away the option for workers in Local Government Areas (LGA) of concern to be tested, either through Rapid Antigen testing, or PCR testing (the normal Covid test) every 3 days. The PHO dictates that for any worker to leave an LGA of concern, they need to have the first jab of a COVID vaccination.

This mandate is worrying on a number of levels:

1. Removing testing regimes from the system means that a significant control that prevents COVID entering the workplace has been removed.
2. Access to vaccines is still difficult for many Transport workers, particularly in the limited time left before 6 September.
3. Allowing non vaccinated workers into workplaces from outside the nominated LGAs, will expose many workers to COVID which they will take home to their home and communities and potentially affect them.

We have been meeting with employers and Transport for NSW all week to try and limit the impact on workers and drive home a clear message that the testing regime is vital in any strategy to limit the spread in workplaces and the broader community. These regimes should compliment the push for workers to be vaccinated and be an alternative for any worker who is unable to be vaccinated for medical or personal reasons.

[The RTBU's position on mandatory vaccination can be found here.](#)

A rapid antigen testing trial is still going to be rolled out across the Transport cluster regardless of the PHO in the coming weeks at the following sites.

- Central (NSWTL)
- Ryde (STA)
- Granville Mechanical (SYDT)
- Clyde (SYDT)
- Flemington Maintenance Centre (SYDT),
- Kingsgrove Depot (Transit Systems),
- Burwood Depot (Transit Systems),
- Transport Management Centre,
- Newcastle Interchange (NSWTL),
- Wollongong Interchange (NSWTL\*),
- Homebush Signalling Complex (SYDT),

- Belmore Disaster Recovery Site (SYDT),
- Sydenham Signal Box (SYDT)
- Rail Operations Centre (SYDT).

*Note: \*Wollongong may be changed out for Dubbo*

Members at Sydney Trains, NSW Trains, Transport for NSW and State Transit Authority who are not able to work because of the new restrictions will be asked to stay home from 6 September and will be paid rostered earnings until 13 September. After that they will be asked to access leave entitlements. If leave entitlements have been exhausted, workers will be placed on unpaid leave until they are either vaccinated or the PHO is amended.

We understand that some private sector employers are asking any workers who are affected from 6 September to access leave entitlements. Some employers are also offering financial incentives for workers to get fully vaccinated. Pacific National is offering \$180, One Rail is offering \$200 credit to workers' Platform accounts, other employers are offering 2 hours' worth of pay for each job. The RTBU is calling on every employer to provide such an incentive.

Earlier this week, Transport for NSW made a decision to ban the wearing of cloth masks in preference of surgical masks. This took delegates and HSRs by surprise given that the rationale behind the move was allegedly based on a workplace risk assessment by the employer. However, there was no consultation with either the union or HSRs on this issue, it was simply announced. It's up to Transport now to ensure that adequate consultation takes place and any evidence of the health benefit of surgical masks is put on the table.

Finally, this week we received many queries from members regarding employers requesting medical information on their vaccination status. As workers, you have no obligation to provide this information, however, just like other medical tests such as drug testing or health checks, if you do not provide it, the employer will deem you as not satisfying the health requirement.

We'll keep fighting for workplace testing to be put back on the table to ensure all workers are treated with respect, and safety is the primary consideration in these trying times.

As always, stay safe.