

SDA Brief: Retail Work Is Essential – Learnings from COVID-19

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THE UNION FOR WORKERS IN RETAIL. WAREHOUSING. FAST FOOD.

Retail Work Is Essential – Learnings from COVID-19

During COVID-19, community access to food, medicine and other necessities depended on:

- workers who could not work from home and
- on union networks able to identify problems, negotiate practical arrangements and communicate changing requirements.

The pandemic demonstrated that resilient supply chains depend on resilient systems and workers. Physical infrastructure, inventories, technology and logistics systems cannot maintain essential services without a workforce that is available, skilled, safe and financially secure.

For the SDA, this is clear: **retail work is essential work**.

The response began with rapid organisational preparation

The first weeks of the pandemic were described as a period of rapid adjustment without an established playbook. In NSW, restrictions on public gatherings forced the cancellation of a large delegates' meeting in Sydney. The NSW Branch responded with an early statement acknowledging the uncertainty and distress facing members while committing the branch to focus on the practical matters it could influence.

In Victoria, preparation began with the prospect that the branch office itself might have to close. After one of the branch's final in-person events in early March 2020, its IT support was asked to prepare for remote work. The decision to order laptops early and redesign telephone arrangements meant information officers and administrative staff could continue supporting members when restrictions arrived.

At the national level, the pace of events required unusually frequent coordination. National Executive discussions occurred about three days a week for several hours at a time, while Branch Secretaries met as often as daily or every second day during the most intensive periods. These meetings allowed branches to compare employer responses, government directions and emerging risks while developing national positions.

This early preparation was not separate from frontline representation. Keeping branch operations functioning, preserving telephone access and obtaining recognition for union officials as essential workers were prerequisites for maintaining contact with members during lockdowns and curfews.

Retail workers sustained essential services and carried the risk

COVID-19 confirmed that retail is the consumer-facing end of essential supply chains. Supermarket, pharmacy, warehouse, distribution, fast food and online fulfilment workers kept goods moving while adapting at short notice to product limits, altered trading, public health controls and rapidly increasing online demand.

The SDA's 2023 submission to the Commonwealth Government's COVID-19 Response Inquiry recorded that workers faced increased workloads and work intensity, heightened exposure, customer aggression and financial vulnerability, especially during the pandemic. It also found that many of these hazards did not disappear when the acute phase of the pandemic ended.

From the outset, our members faced two distinct experiences. Essential workers confronted uncertainty, exposure and workplace safety risks, while workers in non-essential retail faced closures, stand-downs or sudden changes to operating models. Stores such as Big W could be closed to customers but continue click-and-collect operations, leaving workers on site to pick and

prepare online orders under rules that did not always fit conventional categories of essential and non-essential work.

Most of our members could not work remotely. They were often left to explain and enforce directions they had not designed while carrying exposure, increased workloads, customer aggression and income risks. In Victoria, we saw that proposed restrictions did not always account for how supermarket supply chains operated, even when those supply chains were treated as strategic assets. For example, a proposed one-third reduction in staffing would have applied across warehouses and stores even though warehouses were working at full capacity to supply supermarkets. The SDA and employers argued successfully for the reduction to be applied across each company's network, rather than just a standalone building, allowing warehouse staffing to be maintained.

Vaccination requirements created further employment risks. The SDA argued that workers unable to meet those requirements should remain employed rather than be dismissed. In Victoria, some employers nevertheless terminated workers, and the relevant commission and court decisions generally did not support reinstatement. The issue illustrated how a measure directed to public health could have lasting employment consequences if implementation did not account for workers' circumstances.

Income protection was an operational issue

The pandemic exposed significant gaps in paid leave and income support that threatened both workers' security and the availability of essential goods and services.

Paid pandemic or isolation leave was therefore an operational safeguard as well as an income-protection measure. Members who had exhausted their leave entitlements, or had no entitlement to paid leave, faced financial pressure to work while infectious. SDA Branches escalated these cases nationally, raised them with governments and negotiated employer-funded arrangements across the retail and fast food sectors, often covering casual workers. In Victoria, the SDA also welcomed the Andrews Government's decision to underwrite sick leave for casual workers, reducing the financial disincentive to isolate while unwell or awaiting test results.

Beyond paid leave, the ACTU and the SDA advocated broader job and income protection, which eventuated in 'JobKeeper'. The Government resisted calls for this wage subsidy for too long and then had to move hastily to implement it, overlooking important fiscal protections such as requiring companies to pay the money back if ultimately it wasn't used as a wage subsidy.

Administered by the Australian Taxation Office, this critical temporary Commonwealth wage subsidy helped eligible employers significantly affected by COVID-19 to continue paying eligible workers and preserve their employment relationships. Treasury later found that the scheme supported the survival of businesses and jobs, although its eligibility rules left important gaps.

These exclusions were significant. To qualify, casual employees generally had to have worked regularly and systematically for the same employer for at least 12 months, leaving many shorter-term casuals outside the scheme. Many international students and other temporary visa holders were also ineligible for JobKeeper and key income-support payments, despite being part of the workforce that sustained essential retail and fast-food services.

Workers who continued providing essential services faced a different inequity: their increased workloads and exposure were not reflected in their pay. The SDA pushed for their contribution and risk to be recognised through the "Essential Service Payment" of $5 per hour for all frontline workers. In March 2020, Costco paid hourly employees an additional $3 per hour for five weeks

and salaried employees a total of $750. The SDA welcomed the payments and called for a broader essential service payment for frontline workers.

In NSW, one member's experience exposed a wider policy gap. A single parent employed by a fashion retailer in Western Sydney contacted the SDA while facing the loss of long-term accommodation and difficulty securing another home. The SDA helped arrange alternative accommodation through Vinnies and, with the member's permission, used her experience to show governments the consequences of inadequate support. Her experience gave decision-makers a concrete account of how policy settings affected workers' lives.

The SDA converted frontline knowledge into practical action

During the pandemic, the SDA served as a practical intermediary between workers, employers and governments. In the absence of timely and detailed regulatory guidance, the union developed the *10-point Health and Safety Plan*, clarified changing requirements with employers, communicated them to members and escalated operational problems to governments.

A dispute over hand sanitiser at a major supermarket shows how this worked in practice. In Victoria, a health and safety representative at Werribee Plaza challenged the use of a non-alcohol-based product by issuing a provisional improvement notice. The matter became a test case and was escalated to the relevant national health authority, which found the product insufficient. The employer subsequently moved to an alcohol-based product, although it did not accept the ruling's validity. The same issue also required national coordination. While the National Office pursued authoritative advice, Branch Officials contacted local manufacturers to determine whether alternative supplies could be produced at scale. When suppliers had difficulty obtaining ingredients, the SDA leveraged government contacts to raise those constraints.

The SDA's engagement with governments differed across jurisdictions. In Victoria, stakeholder groups brought together health and justice officials, unions and employers. Proposed measures could be tested before regulations were made, although final instruments were sometimes released only hours before taking effect. Every change then triggered an "enormous production line": SDA Industrial Officers contacted their allocated companies, clarified how the rules would operate and communicated the outcome to members.

In NSW, the SDA relied more heavily on informal engagement. We initially responded to government announcements, but became more proactive as we built relationships with Treasury, the Health Department, ministers, employers and other unions. Ministers sometimes contacted the SDA on Sunday evenings before a Monday announcement; we then alerted retailers and prepared tailored advice. These informal channels also gave smaller employers a way to raise concerns they could not put directly to government.

The volume of communication reflected the complexity of the rules. In NSW, member SMS messages rose from about 399,000 in the year before COVID-19 to approximately 1.2 million a year during the three COVID years. Our advice had to vary by company, local government area, Greater Sydney and regional NSW, and distinguish between requirements affecting essential and non-essential workers. The SDA sought to remain a trusted source by checking information before distributing it and correcting advice when directions changed.

Continuity and the supply chain

Customer abuse and violence

Panic buying, stock shortages and public health controls increased the risk of abuse and violence directed at retail and fast-food workers. Our members working in supermarkets reported a sharp rise in incidents as they were required to implement product limits, distancing and other controls while public anxiety was high. The SDA paired calls for stronger protections with public messages asking customers to recognise and thank essential retail workers.

In the SDA's *2021 No One Deserves a Serve* survey of 2,338 members, 88% reported verbal abuse and 8% reported physical violence in the previous 12 months; 70% said abuse and violence had become more frequent during COVID-19, and 21.5% reported being coughed on or spat at.

In NSW, members reported being deliberately spat on. Through an introduction from the Health Services Union, the SDA raised the issue with the NSW Health Minister and contributed to the introduction of additional penalties for spitting on retail workers.

The problem persisted and, in some respects, worsened after the acute phase of the pandemic. The SDA's *2025 No One Deserves a Serve* survey of 2,592 members found that 34% did not feel safe at work and a further 28% were unsure; 88% had experienced verbal abuse in the previous 12 months, including 58% at least monthly; and 25% had experienced physical violence – double the 12.5% recorded in 2023 and more than three times the 8% recorded in 2021.

Our experience confirmed that customer aggression is not an unavoidable part of retail work; it is a work health and safety risk that must be prevented and controlled. We have continued to advocate stronger penalties, workplace protection orders and more systematic controls. Protecting workers is also essential to resilience and national civil preparedness: workers must feel safe and supported if they are to remain on the frontline during a crisis.

Technology and regional access

The pandemic required retailers to change operating models quickly. The SDA advocated reduced cash handling and greater use of contactless payments, while retailers expanded click-and-collect and other online services. These changes helped maintain access to essential goods while reducing avoidable contact between workers and customers.

Maintaining a physical workplace presence also mattered. In Victoria, our Officials were recognised as essential workers and received permits enabling them to visit members, including during curfew periods. Supermarket workers could still be replenishing shelves after stores closed to customers, and we needed to remain able to reach them and respond to issues as they arose.

In regional NSW, we saw the risks of rules designed without sufficient local information. One proposal would have prevented unvaccinated workers from attending work even though many regional workers had not yet been able to access a vaccine. Drawing on information from members and employers about worker locations, vaccination access and likely operational effects, we warned that large parts of regional retail could close. The rule was amended over the weekend in acknowledgement of the access problem.

The SDA had begun seeking priority vaccination for retail, fast food, warehouse and pharmaceutical workers around December 2020. Warehouses generally received earlier attention because one facility could supply hundreds of supermarkets, and some even received on-site vaccination. The union questioned why the cumulative importance of dispersed retail stores was less visible. The NSW government later gave retail workers priority access, initially focusing on workers from local government areas of concern.

These experiences reinforced the findings of the SDA's 2021 *State of the Regions* research: regional continuity cannot be inferred from metropolitan conditions. Fewer stores, longer supply routes and limited workforce capacity mean that disruption to a major store, warehouse or transport link can affect an entire community.

Housing affordability and workforce resilience in regional Australia

COVID-19 also highlighted the relationship between housing affordability and the availability of an essential workforce in regional communities.

As remote work became more common, many metropolitan residents relocated to regional Australia.

The SDA's *State of the Regions* report observed: *"The flight from the cities to the regions as people realised they could work remotely had impacts on property prices, employment and demand for government services."*

While this brought investment and population growth, it also increased pressure on housing markets, particularly rental accommodation. The same research also found growing concern that rising housing costs were making it harder for working people to remain in their communities, with 64% of regional renters expressing concerns about housing affordability.

For essential retail, warehouse, pharmacy and fast food workers, housing is not simply a social policy issue. It is a workforce capability issue. Communities cannot maintain access to food, medicines and essential services if the workers who provide those services are priced out of local housing markets or forced to travel increasing distances to work.

Throughout regional NSW, members reported that competition for housing intensified as metropolitan buyers and renters entered local markets. In some communities, workers who had grown up locally found themselves competing for housing with households bringing metropolitan incomes into regional economies. This placed additional pressure on lower-paid workers employed in retail and service industries that remained physically tied to local communities and could not be performed remotely.

The experience demonstrated that civil preparedness depends not only on physical infrastructure and supply chains, but also on ensuring that essential workers can continue to live within the communities they serve. Workforce housing, affordable rental supply and broader housing affordability should therefore be recognised as resilience issues as well as social and economic policy issues. Regional communities cannot remain resilient if essential workers cannot afford to live in them.

Closures and support measures produced unequal outcomes

The SDA's 2020 *A Pink Recession … so why the Blue Recovery Plan?* paper showed how the structure of retail impacted who lost work. Women comprised 57.7% of the retail workforce overall, but in fashion and department stores women constituted 84.2% and 66.1% respectively of those workforces – fashion and department-store sectors were heavily affected by closures. In the early downturn, jobs held by women fell by 8.1%, compared with 6.2% for men, while reduced hours affected 11.5% of women and 7.5% of men.

The SDA also sought additional sick leave and changes to NSW workers' compensation law. A presumption was introduced that certain public-facing workers who contracted COVID-19 had contracted it at work, improving access to compensation. This mattered because it was otherwise difficult for an individual worker to prove that exposure arose from providing an essential service.

The SDA was also concerned that targeted recovery support was weighted towards heavier industries, while retail and service work received less attention. Delayed award wage increases similarly failed to recognise the contribution of essential retail workers, including those who worked through exceptional demand in businesses whose revenues increased.

The SDA therefore developed retail recovery proposals while restrictions were still in place and contributed to work on reopening the NSW economy. Our position was that recovery could not wait until the crisis had passed: maintaining viable jobs required attention to immediate safety, income during restrictions and the conditions under which stores would reopen.

The crisis also exposed supply risks

Our experience in NSW also connected retail continuity with domestic pharmaceutical production. When a planned closure affected a manufacturer of Panadol, we discussed extending operations with the company; the facility continued operating for longer before closing. The episode sharpened our concern about Australia's dependence on overseas production for critical medicines at a time when international supply chains were under pressure.

We subsequently developed a proposal to rebuild pharmaceutical manufacturing capability in Australia. Although the proposal was not adopted, it reflected the same practical approach we took throughout the pandemic: identify the immediate risk, protect workers and continuity where possible, and begin planning for recovery before the emergency has ended.

For the SDA, essential retail extends beyond the point of sale. Pharmacies, among many essentials, may be where communities obtain basic supplies; but their continuity depends on production, warehousing and a workforce able to keep each link operating.

Frontline intelligence made preparedness work

The SDA's value during the pandemic lay in our reach into workplaces and our capacity to act quickly on information from members and delegates. National coordination allowed one Branch's experience to inform another while recognising that public health authorities and government structures differed across jurisdictions.

We built resilience through ordinary representative work performed at unusual speed: identifying emerging risks, testing new directions against workplace realities, maintaining contact with members and turning individual cases into broader policy advocacy.

Trust made that speed possible. Members relied on us for accurate information, employers recognised that we raised workable concerns and government decision-makers were prepared to hear directly about frontline conditions. Formal consultation enabled early influence over proposed measures, while trusted informal relationships remained available for urgent escalation.

What COVID-19 revealed about civil preparedness

COVID-19 showed that retail work is essential work and that workforce resilience is inseparable from supply-chain resilience. Communities remained supplied because workers attended, adapted and implemented emergency measures, while unions connected frontline experience with employer and government decision-making.

Our experience points to a clear lesson: preparedness depends on trusted relationships, early consultation and institutions capable of turning frontline knowledge into practical solutions. Those capabilities were strongest where government, employers and unions had established channels for coordination, information-sharing and rapid escalation.

Australia's civil preparedness therefore rests not only on physical infrastructure and contingency plans, but on safe and secure work, resilient regional and national supply chains, and the representative institutions that enable workers to contribute to emergency decisions. Recognising retail and its workforce as essential civilian infrastructure is central to maintaining community continuity in future crises.

Together, these stories explain why unions must not be treated as external observers of emergency response. We carried information in both directions – upstream to all levels of government and downstream to employers and members – identified unintended consequences, and helped translate broad public decisions into workable arrangements for stores, warehouses and communities. Unions are an essential entity to work with state, territory and local governments to coordinate and optimise responses to contingencies, and to collaborate with the private sector.

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