




Speech By  
**Michael Berkman**

**MEMBER FOR MAIWAR**

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### **APPROPRIATION (COVID-19) BILL**

 **Mr BERKMAN** (Maiwar—Grn) (4.38 pm): It is a huge relief to everyone that the spread of coronavirus has so far been minimised in Queensland and across the country. I will support this bill, but there are some things I would like to add. Today we are debating how we respond to the huge economic crisis we are now facing, with 120,000-odd Queenslanders out of work. We should be having a broader debate as a society about what kind of economy we want to have once the worst of the danger passes. What parts of the old way do we want to switch back on and what parts should we be leaving behind? It is an important question, because the old ways were simply not working for everyday Queenslanders.

It was not working for the thousands of workers pushed into casual jobs and underemployment, the thousands of people waiting for elective surgery or those households who even before the crisis were struggling to pay their mortgages and their rent. On the other hand, the old way worked pretty well for property developers, banks and big mining companies. Corporate profits were pushing record levels, but regular Queenslanders were not getting their fair share for schools, hospitals and the jobs of the future. As we rebuild we need to make sure Queensland works for everyone, not just those big corporations. That will mean hanging on to the really important things that we have achieved during this crisis—like the promise of free child care for all and unemployment and student benefits that actually are enough to make ends meet and pay the bills each week. It will also mean fighting even harder for things that would make life better for regular people, like housing for all, jobs for all and publicly owned essential services so we can all live a good life.

There are a few specific areas where I believe the state government must do more in its response to the crisis caused by COVID-19. The first is looking after casual workers who have been left behind by the federal LNP and its JobKeeper program. Estimates coming out of Curtin University suggest around 950,000 casual workers will be ineligible for JobKeeper because they have worked at their job fewer than 12 months. Anyone who has ever worked in hospitality or retail will tell you that is just how it goes. Workers in those industries are so insecure and the work so variable that it makes absolutely no sense to lock those people out.

The same applies to migrant workers. It is an absolute shame on this country that we have invited millions of migrant workers here who have contributed to our economy and paid their taxes but then failed to offer them any income support in this crisis. I am calling on the state government to follow the lead of the Northern Territory government in filling the gaps in the federal JobKeeper scheme, supporting casuals and visa holders and other workers left behind by JobKeeper. There are thousands of casual and visa workers, young and old, in my electorate and thousands of international students as well. International students support many west side jobs in universities, especially as federal LNP cuts to universities have left universities ever more reliant on income from overseas. These students contribute a huge amount to our community as scholars, as workers and as our neighbours. Just imagine this. You are stuck in another country. You cannot get home. You cannot leave your house. You have lost your job. You do not have access to Medicare or Centrelink and the Prime Minister is literally on the television telling you to go home.

The response from our community on the west side has been absolutely inspiring. During the COVID-19 crisis, I have seen locals go above and beyond to help their neighbours with food, donations and solidarity. Local charities are scrambling to adapt to the new restrictions and are slowly restarting direct food assistance, but even still the failure of government to lead has meant that it has fallen to my office to put together food parcels for international students on the west side who simply have no other options. These international students contribute so much to our community, and I am urging the state government not to abandon them at this time.

Despite all the stimulus proposed and funded under this bill, the government has persisted with its unbelievably short-sighted public service pay freeze. After inflation, a wage freeze is a real cut for public servants—some of whom are on the front line in fighting this pandemic. Nurses, teachers, cleaners and government call centre workers are the heroes in this fight against COVID-19. A public service pay freeze is a slap in the face and it is straight out of the LNP playbook. We are in a once-in-a-generation jobs and economic crisis, and giving workers a pay cut now will cut spending and only make unemployment worse.

We have heard no suggestion that politicians in this place should take a pay cut. No-one is arguing hard for that, yet these scheduled pay increments—hard won and now long overdue—were largely aimed at some of the lowest paid public servants. We should pay for this crisis by making sure mining companies and big corporations pay their fair share, not by punishing frontline public servants. I will give just one example. Over the last five years alone, mining and gas corporations have exported over \$270 billion worth of coal, gas and minerals from Queensland and paid only eight per cent in royalties. Last but not least, cutting wages for public servants in Queensland is just outdated LNP ideology. Campbell Newman himself was the greatest cheerleader for this pay freeze, and it is such a shame to see Labor buckle under pressure from right-wing scare campaigns from the *Courier-Mail* and washed-up LNP ex-premiers.

I also want to note my support for the proposal for an independent oversight committee to scrutinise the government's response to the pandemic. Over the last few weeks, I have been focused more than full-time on helping west side locals cope with the changes and challenges we are all facing. In between those efforts, our small office has been trying to keep up with the government's response across a huge range of areas. The Chief Health Officer has been remarkably forthcoming with information, and I do want to take this opportunity to directly thank Dr Young for all of her efforts and her communications with my office. However, the same has not been true for all of government in all instances, and I will give some concrete examples.

Here are a few questions I have been trying to have answered over the last few weeks without any success. In many cases, I have put these questions in writing to the ministers or departments responsible but have not heard a thing. How much public money are we spending on renting private hospital beds? Where is the data on police fines and arrests for breaches of the new social distancing laws? Is the government delivering testing for COVID-19 in Queensland prisons in line with health advice? Exactly how many workers and which categories of workers are affected by the frontline public service pay freeze? The inquiries that were initiated just this morning and will now be undertaken by existing parliamentary committees are certainly better than nothing. However, putting aside the government control of these committees, I am unconvinced that their remit will be broad enough to address all the questions Queenslanders will want answered at the end of this crisis.

In closing, I would like to reiterate my support for the bill. I am sure I join with all Queenslanders in a collective sigh of relief that the response to COVID-19 has thus far been as effective as we have seen, but we have a long road ahead. I ask the government to make sure we take the side of everyday Queenslanders as we emerge out the other side and to make sure we achieve the best possible future for those people out of these tough times.