



Joint Statement from the Ai Group and the AWU on COVID-19

The Australian Workers Union (AWU) and Ai Group are joining forces to urge that every effort is made to ensure Australian manufacturing businesses remain safe and can continue to supply the needs of Australian households, businesses, community organisations and health providers.

Containing the Spread of COVID-19

The AWU and Ai Group welcome the extended social distancing measures agreed to by the National Cabinet on 29 March and the earlier announcements constraining overseas travel and the quarantining of people arriving from abroad.

We welcome also the guidelines about social distancing and hygiene in workplaces. Both our organisations are active in informing our members of best practice and the importance of these practices being followed.

Limiting business closures

It is crucial that businesses in vital areas keep operating through these difficult times and that people remain employed as much as possible. This includes businesses involved in manufacturing such as food processing, packaging, pharmaceuticals, chemicals (including sanitising and cleaning products), and health industry supplies. It also includes industries necessary for these activities to continue – those in their supply chains and service partners. In addition, the AWU and Ai Group support the continuation of business activity and employment in cases where the health risks do not justify shutdowns. This includes activities that can be managed by working from home as well as the large parts of the economy that can be run without infringing social distancing rules. Businesses in metal production and fabrication, glass making, cement production, paper production, and building products manufacturing – along with many other areas of manufacturing – can operate safely within social distancing guidelines.

Many manufacturing businesses cannot be turned off and on with the flick of a switch. Closures can take time; they are costly and often hazardous. Restarting many manufacturing processes is similarly time-consuming, costly, and dangerous. These extra costs and risks need to be weighed in any assessment of a shut down. If they can operate safely they should remain open.

Retaining employment

Over 920,000 people are directly employed in Australia's manufacturing sector. The harm that would result from their unemployment should be a key consideration in any decision to limit economic activity.

Many are employed in industries that supply basic needs. Many more are employed in businesses that can continue to operate safely and without increasing risks of community transmission of COVID-19.

History suggests unemployment rises much faster than it falls. The costs of unemployment – both human and economic – last for many years beyond the passing of the economic downturn. Many people, particularly those who are older and less skilled, will never be reemployed.

Both the AWU and Ai Group welcome the measures the government has introduced to improve the provision of mental health services in Australia.

Avoiding unnecessary business closures will help avoid further escalation of the adverse mental health outcomes associated with unemployment.

Ai Group and the AWU call on all Australian governments to make every effort to keep businesses operating if they are able to adhere to workplace hygiene and social distancing guidelines.

