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CWAO responds to COVID-19 – a public report

By Lynford Dor (CWAO)

On Monday 16 March, Casual Workers Advice Office (CWAO) held an internal staff meeting to discuss an organisational response to the impending coronavirus crisis. The President's various addresses to the Nation did little to convince anyone in CWAO that the state was capable of combatting the spread of the virus, or prepared to take the necessary step to ensure that it would be in the coming weeks.

It was recognised that CWAO would have to play an important role in raising awareness of COVID-19 in working class communities across Gauteng through its connection to workers in the Simunye Workers Forum. It was also noted that in a lockdown/shutdown CWAO would have to use its connections with workers (both employed and unemployed) to foster and stay in touch with the self-defence initiatives of workers and community activists organising against the coronavirus. With the number of confirmed infections climbing rapidly, we were aware that we would have to move extremely quickly and carefully. This report lays out in detail the organisation's response to the coronavirus before the lockdown began.

By Tuesday, 17 March, CWAO began to print awareness-raising pamphlets that had been written by the Khanya Forum. CWAO organisers delivered boxes of these pamphlets to workplaces, spaza shops and taxi associations who offered to distribute them. Throughout the rest of the week, as CWAO continued to distribute pamphlets, we learnt that very few people had information about the Coronavirus and how to combat it. The government had certainly made no attempt to raise awareness on the ground in Gauteng!

On Wednesday, 18 March, 18 leading Simunye activists from five different companies met with CWAO to plan a response to the crisis. The discussion revolved around how employed workers could pressure their employers to either shut their factories or restructure to produce only those items that were needed in combatting the virus. Dismissed workers also discussed their role, many of whom recognised that they would have to lead the defence against the COVID-19 virus in their communities. Workers decided to call an urgent meeting of the Simunye Workers Forum for Saturday, 21 March, to present these ideas to other workers and to raise consciousness about the virus.

The risks of not holding this meeting were weighed against the risks of large gatherings contributing to the spread of the disease. It was eventually agreed that only representatives from each company would attend. In the end a total of 79 workers attended the meeting from 26 companies. Most of the meeting was held in smaller groups in separate rooms, where workers divided themselves along industrial lines. Chemical sector workers discussed plans to demand that their companies produce sanitisers and soaps instead of perfumes, for example. Food sector workers discussed the need to get their companies to produce affordable, nutritious food instead of luxury foods. Logistics workers discussed how their companies could contribute to developing more equitable distribution networks to direct resources to working class communities.

This Saturday meeting was not only essential for CWAO to be able to raise the alarm with worker representatives who would then take the message into their factories, but it also allowed workers to take pamphlets into their communities. After the Saturday meeting we counted that around 100 000 pamphlets had been distributed.

The experience of the first week of action clarified the need for an intensification of awareness raising. On Monday, 23 March, CWAOW printed 200 000 more awareness raising pamphlets. Another 400 000 were printed in the course of the week that followed – bringing the combined total to 700 000.

Boxes and boxes of these pamphlets were sent to Khanya College and the Gauteng Community Healthcare Workers Forum to be distributed on the West Rand. CWAOW also delivered some of these pamphlets to a number of clinics across Ekurhuleni where Community Health Workers (CHWs) began distributing them. At many of these government clinics in Ekurhuleni there was no information available for the communities on the coronavirus and none of the necessary hygiene measures had been put in place.

CWAOW's primary means of distributing pamphlets in Ekurhuleni was through a network of former Ekurhuleni Municipality EPWP workers. This network of workers, numbering in their thousands, were originally employed by a labour broker called Lungile Mtshali before they were dismissed in 2015. They have been fighting a five-year battle to win their jobs back, and in doing so have built strong structures on the ground with representatives and "brigades" in almost every ward of the municipality. Along with pamphlets, Lungile Mtshali workers were supplied with boxes of bleach. In mixing one-part bleach to 10 parts water, these workers are producing makeshift sanitisers to defend against the spread of the virus in their communities.

Despite being treated like dirt by the municipality for over five years, it is these workers that are the best hope of providing the hygiene measures needed to defend a significant section of the working class in Ekurhuleni against the virus. The Lungile Mtshali brigades will have to form the basis of the neighbourhood crisis committees that will be needed in the days, weeks and months to come. CWAOW's ability to stay in touch with these workers will be severely hampered by the lockdown, which began on Friday, 27 March.

This is a public report written by Lynford Dor (Casual Workers Advice Office).

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