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# Strange Solidarities in Stranger Times

by Kari Dahlgren

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*How coronavirus makes mining communities more vulnerable to fly-in-fly-out work.*

Our lives are now, more than ever before, mediated by digital technology. Every friendly chat, every work meeting, every happy hour, every family catchup, even weddings and births, are happening through a device, a screen, and an internet connection. Because they must. Social distancing makes digital socialising the only safe option. In certain ways, coronavirus is revealing how far technology has come, how much it enables. Still, simultaneously it is demonstrating exactly what it cannot do, and the [human labour](#) on which it depends.

While for most of us our homes have become every place—the office, the daycare, the cafe, the pub—there are still many others who must go to work in increasingly hazardous conditions outside of hospitals. The pandemic is making the importance of these professions increasingly evident: rubbish collectors, grocery store workers, home delivery drivers. We are recognising these workers now as ‘essential services’, performing the physical labour that an isolated life needs to function.

It’s about time we take more notice of the service workers who are vital to a semi-functioning economy. There are deeper layers of hidden labour that must still work to produce and maintain the material foundation of everyday life. Let’s consider the coal miners.

Coal miners are contentious characters in Australian political and social life, for they represent the Australian left’s polar tension between its labour heritage rooted in mining and its increasing concerns over climate change and the energy transition.

I want to bring attention to the role of coal miners and their figuring as essential in the times of the coronavirus because in doing so I hope that this opportunity might bridge a political and ethical divide, which is often played up in politics around climate change to all of our

28 detriments. For just as coronavirus is shining light on which services are essential, it is also bringing attention to a crucial vulnerability in the Australian extractive sector, one that mining communities have been critiquing for several years.

The Australian mining industry is heavily reliant on fly-in-fly-out (FIFO) workforces who, the story goes, must be brought in from elsewhere because mining takes place in remote locations. While this is true for certain mines, many of these so-called 'remote' locations are surrounded by local communities who call these places home. FIFO has often occurred at the expense of these communities.

The poster child for this tension between established mining communities and FIFO workforces is the central Queensland coal mining town of Moranbah, where I spent October 2015 to July 2016 doing ethnographic fieldwork. The area primarily mines coking metallurgical coal—used in the production of steel—which, unlike thermal coal for energy production, is not replaceable by renewables at scale.

The town itself was founded in 1971, specifically to house the workforce and families of the men coming to work in the newly built mines. However, particularly since the end of the 2008-2012 commodities boom, the limited number of jobs in the mining industry are going to FIFO workers rather than residents.

This employment strategy has several benefits to the mining companies. Overall, it enables greater control over the workforce through several tactics. Companies can hire beyond the community so they recruit workers without family histories in mining and thus no attachments to the labour unions. FIFO reduces absenteeism as workers are separated from the demands of family life—no need to worry about work-life balance when you live at work. Moreover, FIFO is a systematic strategy across the industry to reduce companies' needs to invest in the local communities which surround mines.

But the consequences of, and response to, coronavirus are testing the FIFO model. The actual process of flying into work means that miners board small regional planes, ride together in buses, and sleep in camps with shared dining facilities. Since they are deemed essential, miners have so far been exempt from the 14 day isolation

29 period for interstate travellers. In Central Queensland, the majority of FIFO miners travel within the state, primarily the surrounds of Brisbane, so interstate restrictions won't substantially affect the movement of Queensland's mining workforce. Mining companies want to avoid endangering the health of their workforce, but the structures of FIFO make social distancing extremely difficult to enforce. Further, because the mining industry has been casualizing their workforce, often through [outsourcing](#) operations to labour-hire firms, workers without job security are less likely to raise safety and health concerns.

Coronavirus raises new challenges to the reliance on FIFO in the extractive sector, making this model [more hazardous](#) to the lives of miners, their families, and broader communities. Rural areas are already vulnerable places, and flying mine workers into and out of them, excluding them from quarantine requirements, is a potential disaster waiting to happen. In addition to the increased risk of infection, places like Moranbah receive state services based on their residential population numbers, not the numerous FIFO workers that come into and out of the region. The nearest Intensive Care Unit, nearly 200km away in the town of Mackay, has only nine beds—to service the entire mining region.

The local community in Moranbah has been resisting the use of FIFO workforces for many years, and coronavirus has raised the stakes of this strategy for local communities. The public health crisis further highlights that the major threat to coal mining communities, like Moranbah, comes not from climate change policy or the increasing affordability of renewable energy, but from exploitative employment policies that are slowly eating away at the communities who call these places home.

Bringing attention to the plight of coal mining communities reveals a space for social solidarity and a need for a political coalition that recognises and respects coal mining communities even as it criticizes the mining companies which exploit them.

Many miners hold what anthropologist Jessica Smith has [called](#), an "ethics of material provisioning." That is, they take pride in, and maintain an ethical commitment to, their labour's role in providing the materials that enable the comfortable lives most of us have become

30 accustomed to. As coronavirus invigorates a new appreciation for those who provide the essential services on which we rely, so too should it remind us of the material commodities that make modern life: the energy that powers the internet, the coking coal and iron ore that make the steel holding up our apartment towers or wind turbines, and the rare earth metals in our laptops and phones.

This is not to say that climate change isn't a crucial issue or to ignore the environmental damage of mining. However, it is also critical that we acknowledge our mutual dependencies. Coronavirus has forced us into self-isolation, but when we emerge from our homes we should do so together, ready to build a better world, with and for everybody.

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