

Adelaide Airport

TWU SAFETY INVESTIGATION

Qantas COVID-19 Cluster



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Adelaide Airport **Safety Investigation**

BACKGROUND

In the last week of March 2020, a large COVID-19 outbreak at Adelaide Airport, which began with a cluster among Qantas baggage handlers, has become one of the biggest threats to public health in South Australia during this pandemic. Several dozen people were infected and hundreds more exposed to the potentially deadly virus.

Under health and safety law, the primary duty of care lies with the airline to eliminate or minimise the risk of transmission in an outbreak.

Serious questions have been raised about whether Qantas acted responsibly in managing the risks of infection and transmission, not only to its own workforce but to the travelling public and the people of South Australia.

ABOUT QANTAS GROUND OPERATIONS

Qantas workers have been at the front line of this pandemic since day one. Several hundred workers work for Qantas behind the scenes at Adelaide Airport, performing a range of essential functions to get the travelling public away safely each and every time they fly, including: baggage handling, ramp and pushback teams, waste and cleaning, as well as handling freight and parcels, both international and domestic. Additionally, there are a much large number of Qantas employees performing a range of clerical, administrative, check in, onboard crewing and other functions.



TWU SAFETY INVESTIGATION

The Transport Workers Union of South Australia has launched an independent investigation to understand the causes of this outbreak.

The union has exercised entry powers under section 118 and 120 of the *WHS Act 2012* (SA) to obtain Qantas safety records and documentation and examine whether Qantas put all reasonable measures in place and exercised the appropriate standard of care.

The union also conducted interviews with workers across the Qantas Group in Adelaide and across Adelaide Airport to ascertain the events leading up to the cluster and subsequent steps taken after the outbreak occurred.

The following document outlines the investigator's findings based on the documentation obtained and the interviews conducted.

It also incorporates information received from a comprehensive national survey of Qantas employees, in which more than 80% of Qantas employees stated they do not believe the airline has put adequate safety measures in place in response to COVID-19.

Given the seriousness of the violations detailed in this report and the ongoing efforts to contain the pandemic, the TWU is seeking that the strongest possible action be taken to prosecute any breaches of health and safety. The TWU is already engaging with safety regulators in South Australia and New South Wales with a view to enforcement proceedings.

WHY A THOROUGH FOLLOW ON INVESTIGATION IS NECESSARY

This dossier will be submitted to Safe Work SA and SA Health and will be made public.

We support a follow-up investigation by regulators into what occurred at Adelaide Airport and how the cluster was allowed to develop. We believe this will be important in ensuring that protections are in place for workers and airline passengers.

Few industries have been hit as hard as the aviation industry since the global pandemic began. Both workers and passengers must have confidence that appropriate systems are in place ahead of the lifting of travel restrictions.



Summary of findings

Qantas has published a large volume of material internally since this crisis began, but TWU investigators have discovered a concerning lack of substance to the airline's response.

A review of Qantas safety documentation by TWU investigators shows that much of the airline's COVID-19 response consists of generic health advice about the virus, guidelines about how to wash your hands and coughing etiquette, and material cut and pasted from government advisories.

When it came to actually changing workplace practices to eliminate or minimise the risk of transmission, the airline failed to act.

It is not known whether cost cutting led to the airline's inaction, but the outcome is clear with dozens of COVID-19 infections linked to airport clusters and hundreds placed into isolation as a result.

It is also clear from the interviews conducted with workers at Adelaide Airport that there were serious issues evident before the cluster outbreak which could have contributed to the spread.

In the days following the outbreak, there appears to have been a failure to implement procedures which could have contained and prevented the spread.

QANTAS APPROACH TO PANDEMIC FRIGHTENINGLY UNSOPHISTICATED

One of the most alarming findings is the repeated assertion by Qantas throughout the pandemic that the risk to employees, other than when directly treating an infected person, is "incredibly low" or "close to zero". This is despite evidence from early on that COVID-19 is a highly infectious virus, spread globally primarily by individuals via air travel.

Through this investigation TWU has obtained Qantas safety documentation, detailed below, in which the airline downplays the risks, at one stage even comparing the virus favourably to seasonal flu. It is this flawed thinking which sits behind the airline's inadequate response.

As a consequence, Qantas's overall approach has been frighteningly unsophisticated. The airline's chief strategy has been to put up signs about hand hygiene and coughing etiquette - a cheap and easy option which requires little effort - at the expense of more in-depth solutions to minimise transmission, such as enhanced cleaning, sanitising of surfaces, managing access to meal areas and amenities, allowing staff extra time to carry out cleaning (in the case of aircraft cleaners), allowing staff extra time to clean themselves between tasks or supplying and regularly replacing protective equipment.

These practices may cost slightly more and require more effort but can help to prevent or eliminate the risk of infection and spread altogether.



QANTAS OPTS FOR CHEAP, SIMPLISTIC SOLUTIONS

Qantas is instead relying on what are known as ‘administrative controls’, widely considered by health and safety experts to be the least effective ways to combat risk.

In health and safety, there is a concept called the ‘hierarchy of controls’, a principle embedded in the Work Health and Safety laws of South Australia and other states. This is the idea that, when dealing with a serious hazard, it is preferable to eliminate a hazard by systematic means such as isolation or engineering, rather than relying on administrative measures such as signage or leaflets.

Leaflets and signage, while important, are not sufficient on their own because they depend on the individual behaviour of thousands of people. It is better practice to eliminate hazards at their source, to stop transmission in the first place. Unfortunately, administrative controls are preferred by some employers because they are cheap and easy and throw most of the responsibility back to workers.

A large and sophisticated organisation like Qantas would be expected to do better. For example, Qantas would be expected to put in place enhanced cleaning regimes for all high touch surfaces, stagger shifts and breaks, provide extra meal areas or changing facilities, factor extra time into rostering to allow workers time to wash between tasks and eliminate altogether the use of shared equipment like headsets or machinery. There is growing evidence that this did not occur. Relying exclusively on leaflets and hand washing and normal cleaning falls short of the standard of care a reasonable person should have exercised, especially an organisation the size and sophistication of Qantas, whose employees have been on the frontline of this pandemic since day one.

The following details a series of specific omissions and concerns which have come to light during the investigation.

THINGS QANTAS HAS DONE WHICH APPEAR TO BE OK

Correspondence between Qantas and SA Health obtained by TWU as part of this investigation shows a one-off ‘deep clean’ following the confirmation of the first infection case appears to have been done in accordance with SA Health Guidelines. The TWU has obtained copies of Safety Data Sheets for virus-specific sanitation chemicals used in the clean and checklists for areas to be cleaned, which, on the face of it, checks out.

Unfortunately, we believe this deep-clean occurred too late, on the evening of March 30th which was over two days following the first infection case of a baggage handler was confirmed.

Hand hygiene appears to have been adequately covered, to the point of over-reliance. Qantas safety documentation shows this was the mainstay of the airline’s response. In a national TWU survey of Qantas employees, most workers reported that signs were put up in workplaces across Australia, with 42% reporting they were given a brief announcement about the virus and the importance of hand washing, and 18% of workers reporting being sent health advice in an email form. But there appears to be limits to how far Qantas was willing to go to spread the message, with less than 4% of workers given an hour or more than one hour of training about how to prevent and minimise the risk of transmission.



RISK ASSESSMENTS GOT IT WRONG

In the months of February and March, Qantas produced a series of documents internally, including risk assessments and health alerts which assessed the risk of COVID-19 as “low”, and assessed the controls the airline had put in place, which consisted mainly of posters about hand hygiene and coughing etiquette, as “fully effective”.

An update from Qantas Group Medical issued on 2 February, obtained by TWU as part of this investigation, even compares the virus favourably to seasonal influenza, saying that while the novel aspect of this virus and the public health response naturally raises natural concern, it must be “kept in perspective”.

A follow up notice *Precautionary Health Alert for Novel Coronavirus*, which was in effect from 10 February, rates the risk of COVID-19 spreading to ground staff as “extremely unlikely” and instructs staff to follow normal procedures, saying “normal procedures are effective in providing protection”.

Despite mounting cases at that time and growing concern in the community, Qantas stuck to its ‘head in the sand’ approach, repeating the airline’s position as late as 9 March 2020, issuing advice which recommends ground workers apply “routine processes” and asserts that the risk to ground workers remains “extremely unlikely” and that “normal procedures are effective in providing protection”.

The airline conducted two national briefings for employee Health and Safety Representatives (HSRs) on 6 February and 10 February in which Qantas representatives advised employee representatives about the risks of COVID-19 and the controls that the airlines had put in place. The TWU has obtained through this investigation Qantas’s official meeting notes from these briefings, which show that Qantas was downplaying the risks and relying on handwashing and coughing etiquette as the main if not sole remedy.

The airline’s position conveyed in that meeting is that “the likelihood of someone in the workplace being infected is very, very low” with a Qantas Medical Officer informing workers that there is close to “zero risk of infection to a person from touching an aircraft surface”.

According to Qantas minutes from this meeting, the Medical Officer goes on to blame the media for overhyping the coronavirus, saying it is the unrelenting media reports which are driving fear and concern in the community.

Qantas minutes also report the Qantas Medical Officer as admitting that the virus can spread on surfaces but that this was only in “perfect lab conditions, which does not translate to the real world”, going on to say that “if the virus was spread by surface contact, the number of infected people would be far greater than it is”. Again, downplaying the risk.

This position - that the risk is low and the only thing to do is wash your hands – was also being given to workers on the ground. A fact sheet for ground workers distributed during February states that transmission of the virus through handling of property (e.g. bags, passports) that had been in contact with infected persons is “extremely unlikely”.

It is the view of TWU investigators that this flawed thinking, downplaying the risk despite growing evidence that the virus was very contagious and potentially fatal, lies behind the airline’s inadequate response. To underplay the seriousness of the pandemic at such a critical time is negligent if not reckless, and entirely out of step with community expectation.



BUSINESS AS USUAL

Beyond hand washing, the actual safety measures put in place by Qantas were rudimentary at best. For workers on the ground it was business as usual, with posters about handwashing and coughing etiquette the main if not sole control.

TWU investigators obtained under section 118 and 120 of the WHS Act all safety documentation in relation to controls in effect at the time of the outbreak and there is no evidence of altered work practices or even that a review of work processes occurred.

In fact, changes to work processes for baggage handlers are expressly ruled out in the airline's policy documents, with a series of *Precautionary Health Alert for Novel Coronavirus* leaflets published during the month of February telling baggage handlers to apply "normal processes" and that the risk of COVID-19 spreading to ground staff as "extremely unlikely" and that "normal procedures are effective in providing protection".

In interviews with the TWU, workers highlighted instances in the lead up to the cluster where there was a lack of specific protocols for ground crew about what to do when suspected cases of the virus occurred at the airport.

When flights arrived into Adelaide Airport known to be carrying passengers onboard with symptoms akin to COVID-19, measures were put in place regarding medical teams dispatched to the flights and systems were put in place to protect other passengers, but when ground crews were directed to work on these flights they were told to carry out their work as normal. No specific protocols were in place and no additional personal protective equipment was directed to be used or worn before crew approached these flights.

LACK OF ACTION AFTER OUTBREAK DECLARED

Taking into account interviews with workers, the following scenario has been pieced together in terms of what occurred between the first infection case being confirmed and the spread and development of the cluster.

On 28 March after the first virus case was confirmed, Qantas informed certain staff that they had worked with the infected party.

In some cases, staff had worked over the previous week in close proximity with the infected party as part of a team for several hours over several days.

This work would have included a range of interactions such as: working on aircraft, handling the same equipment, passing baggage between each other, taking rest and meal breaks together, using the same equipment and utensils in common areas, using the same tables and chairs in common rooms, passing through the same areas, sharing the same bathroom facilities.

Despite this, Qantas informed staff that if they did not have symptoms no action was needed to be taken. They were not told to self-isolate at this stage and they were not told to stop coming in for rostered work. As a result, workers who had been exposed to the virus but remained asymptomatic at this point continued to turn up for work, as directed by Qantas.

Workers said they were concerned about potential exposure and worried they had not been given enough information on what to do should they develop symptoms or support to seek if they were concerned. Unsurprisingly, some went on to develop symptoms soon after they had been contacted by Qantas and tested positive for the virus.



In documents obtained by the TWU, the airline admits that workers were even required to use shared headsets even after the cluster outbreak, until this was queried by SA health on or around 31 March. The TWU believes this would be the tip of the iceberg in terms of internal transmission risks.

In the days following the development of the cluster when several workers in the baggage room had already been infected, Qantas still persisted with downplaying the risk. Shockingly the airline criticised SA Health over the advice it gave to passengers and workers at Adelaide Airport. In a webinar call on April 3rd with workers across the Group, a Qantas doctor said information from SA Health at that point had been “disappointing” and “misleading”. He criticised the SA health authorities for telling people to wipe down their bags stating this “was really not in line with anything we know about the outbreak”. He also criticised isolation notices given to WA cabin crew who had transited through stating, “you don't get the virus by walking through Adelaide airport”.

TWU investigators are firmly of the view that Qantas’s lack of action and lack of acceptance of the seriousness of the situation allowed the cluster to spread in the way that it did and resulted in 750 workers being quarantined.

NO ISOLATION FOR FREIGHT WORKERS

As the severity of the cluster developed in early April, more Qantas staff were directed to self-isolate. This led to an announcement on 12 April by SA Health that 750 Qantas staff had been ordered to self-isolate. This amounted to a sizeable proportion of Qantas staff at Adelaide Airport.

But for some reason the airline’s freight workers were excluded. Even when the wider staff self-isolation was put into effect, Qantas Freight workers remained at work and were not told to self-isolate. This is concerning, as freight workers interact with baggage workers on a daily basis when servicing aircraft, often working at close quarters or using the same equipment.

ATTITUDE TO CLEANING “ASTONISHINGLY LAX”

There is no evidence that the airline put in place any enhanced cleaning regime in the lead up to the cluster outbreak. Guidelines in Qantas notices such as the *Precautionary Health Alert for Novel Coronavirus* published in the month of February state that business units should apply “routine cleaning” and that “normal processes” are sufficient, including in the cleaning of aircraft.

This is consistent with reports from NSW, where Qantas is being prosecuted by the safety regulator WorkSafe for lax hygiene standards and for threatening and disciplining a worker who raised concerns about hygiene practices, including the same dirty damp rag being used to clean hundreds of tray tables.

By the time March arrived, Australia was in the middle of a rapidly escalating pandemic. At this point you would expect to see some kind of elevated urgency around cleaning, such as daily or twice-daily disinfecting of high touch items like handrails, light switches, work equipment and machines, vehicles, meal room tables, taps, kitchens, as well as flight crew amenities, lounges, chairs and rest facilities. There is no evidence anything like this occurred. In fact, correspondence between Qantas and SA Health shows a gym was in operation at Adelaide until at least 31 March.



These findings are consistent with eyewitness reports from the baggage operation, who observed poor hygiene and cleaning standards in the common area for staff engaged in baggage and ground handling duties for several months before the cluster occurred. This included: kitchen area, lounge room, equipment in these areas, floors, tables and chairs.

Reports were filed to management at the time via an online reporting system (precluding workers from keeping records) but no action was taken to improve cleaning. Reports on the ground also confirm that Qantas was slow to act once the outbreak occurred. On Saturday 28 March, after informing certain staff of the initial virus case among the workforce, employees stated there was no immediate action to ensure staff had adequate PPE or means of carrying out vital handwashing or cleaning following contact with each other, equipment and baggage during the course of their duties.

Employees reported there was no soap or hand towels in the bathroom used by ground crew, even the morning after the first case was confirmed.

QANTAS RESISTS BASIC PROTECTIVE EQUIPMENT

Even personal protective equipment (PPE) such as masks and gloves has been vigorously resisted by the airline. PPE guidelines circulated by Qantas state that workers should use “nominal PPE only”, which we take to mean basic or standard PPE, and a PPE fact sheet distributed in February states that normal PPE is sufficient for all airport ground workers, including Fleet Presentation carrying out cleaning duties onboard aircraft.

During February and March, the use of additional PPE to prevent infection was largely confined to workers managing actual COVID19 cases or in limited circumstances for workers in Mainland China and Hong Kong. PPE even features in a group-wide risk assessment as one of the key hazards, noting the likely consequence as the problem of contracting for the supply and disposal of PPE. Qantas appeared to be more concerned about cost than health and safety.

The airline issued narrow guidelines which discouraged and all but prohibited the use of masks. There were no provisions for supply and disposal of fresh work gloves for baggage handlers. You would expect to see work gloves being changed out and resupplied at prescribed intervals, such as daily or after each flight, particularly if working on flights with passengers known to be infected with COVID19. There was nothing in Qantas’s procedures to address this. The policy was similarly strict for disposable latex gloves, with incredibly narrow guidelines strongly discouraging and all but prohibiting the use of disposable latex gloves. Gowns for workers who need them were limited, with procedures strongly discouraging except where there are actual blood or bodily fluids.

There was no provision of additional uniforms or outer garments for ground crew, and no arrangements for the sanitary washing of outer garments. Regularly swapping out gloves or outer garments after handling baggage on flights with passengers known or suspected to be infected for safe disposal or washing, would seem to be a common-sense solution, but this also did not occur.

TWU did not find in Qantas’s safety documentation any reference to any additional time provided to workers to swap out protective gear and no additional time was provided for handwashing, which is consistent with reports from workers on the ground.



There was no evidence of training beyond a notice on a noticeboard, emails or blanket announcements. In the national survey of Qantas workers, less than 4% of workers reported receiving an hour or more of training.

CONSULTATION OF WORKERS NOT A PRIORITY

Consultation with workers in the lead up to this outbreak was poor.

Consultation with workers is not just good practice, it is mandatory under safety law. This is because workers performing the work often have first-hand knowledge of likely points of transmission and the type of safety measures that could be effective on the job.

The TWU's national survey of Qantas workers shows 80% report they have received no consultation of any kind. The opinions of workers do not appear to be a priority for Qantas.

TWU has been able to confirm that Qantas conducted two national phone calls with employee Health and Safety Representatives on 6 and 10 February, which included at least one worker from Adelaide. Records obtained by TWU during this investigation show that subject matter was broad, mainly covering general questions and answers about the virus with an emphasis on hand hygiene.

TWU has also obtained two Qantas-wide risk assessments, one of which dated 6 March was discussed with one Qantas Ground Services employee at Adelaide airport. It is not known what form this consultation took, or how in depth the consultation was, whether the worker was asked any specific questions for feedback, or the outcome of the consultation. According to Qantas's own records, this is the extent of consultation with ground workers in Adelaide since this pandemic began: two phone calls to a handful of employees across the entire Qantas group, and one individual conversation with a worker at Qantas Ground Services in Adelaide. There are no records of any other worker consultation, formal or informal, undertaken at Adelaide Airport. Given the biggest health crisis in the history of aviation, it's fair to say this is a pretty poor effort.



Conclusions

Based on the shortcomings detailed above, identified from a comprehensive review of Qantas safety documentation, interviews with first-hand witnesses and a detailed national survey of Qantas workers, TWU investigators are of the view that Qantas has a serious case to answer.

We believe regulators and health authorities in South Australia should look at the following list of failings by Qantas:

- Lack of acceptance by Qantas that COVID-19 posed a serious threat of infection and transmission among its workers, with continual communications to workers stressing the “low” risk. This was despite early evidence that the virus was highly contagious and was being transmitted across international borders mainly by individuals via air travel
- Lack of advice and training for workers on mitigating risk of infection and spread, other than notices and communication on hand-washing and coughing etiquette
- Lack of PPE to mitigate risk of infection and spread
- Lack of adequate cleaning and hygiene standards at Adelaide Airport particularly for baggage handlers in the lead up to the cluster
- Lack of systems in place for ground crew at Adelaide Airport in instances where a suspected case of COVID-19 on a flight was identified
- Inadequate advice to workers when they were informed that they had potentially been exposed to the virus on and soon after March 28
- Wrong advice to workers who had been exposed to the first infection case at Adelaide Airport that no action was needed if they remained asymptomatic, including that they should still turn up for work. This runs contrary to early evidence that infected individuals can remain asymptomatic for long periods before developing symptoms, thereby spreading the infection
- Late deep-cleaning of the baggage room and common areas after the first confirmed case, taking place over two days after the first infection case was confirmed
- No soap or hand towels available for workers in the bathroom immediately after the first case was confirmed
- A failure to consult with workers to manage of risk of COVID-19 infection and transmission at the airport

Under the *Work Health and Safety Act 2012 (SA)*, Qantas is subject to a duty of care to provide a safe workplace for its own workforce and for other workers at the airport, as well as visitors and the travelling public.

Through its inactions and omissions, the airline has failed to take all reasonable steps to ensure safety. Despite publishing a lot of generic material and putting up leaflets about hand washing and coughing etiquette, the airline took little in the way of actual steps to improve safety. Unsurprisingly, workers contracted the virus and it spread rapidly through the airport, with workers and others suffering harm as a result.



Qantas chose a 'business as usual' approach, with no altered work practices, limited or no additional PPE, no enhanced hygiene or cleaning, no sanitising of bags or surfaces, no local task-based risk assessments, and to make matters worse, little to no consultation with workers at the airport. These types of actions could have reduced such widespread transmission of the virus and perhaps prevented the outbreak in the first place.

At a minimum, this conduct amounts to a breach of section 19 of the *Work Health and Safety Act 2012* (SA), which places the primary duty of care on the person conducting the business or undertaking to ensure the health and safety of workers as far as is reasonably practicable. The *Work Health and Safety Act 2012* (SA) provides penalties for category 1 offences (i.e. offences with the element of recklessness) of up to \$3 million for corporations, with individuals or officers facing fines of up to \$600,000 and/or 5 years imprisonment.

TWU investigators also believe Qantas has breached section 47 of the Act, which places the airline under a duty to consult with workers who carry out work for the business or undertaking about matters which may affect their safety. The Act and regulations contain a very specific definition of consultation, requiring genuine consultation with affected workers, not box-ticking exercise. Breaches of this section attract a maximum penalty in the case of an individual of \$20,000, or in the case of a body corporate \$100,000.



Recommended action

The Transport Workers Union is demanding the following:

1. A full investigation of Qantas by the workplace safety watchdog SafeWork SA and SA Health into the failings identified in this dossier and how the cluster was allowed to occur;
2. If breaches are found, any relevant enforcement actions should be taken against Qantas as a deterrence of future conduct
3. That Qantas representatives meet the TWU and safety regulators nationally, to identify what improved safety arrangements can be put in place to ensure the safety of workers and the travelling public if and when usual operations resume, to avoid a repeat of March 2020.