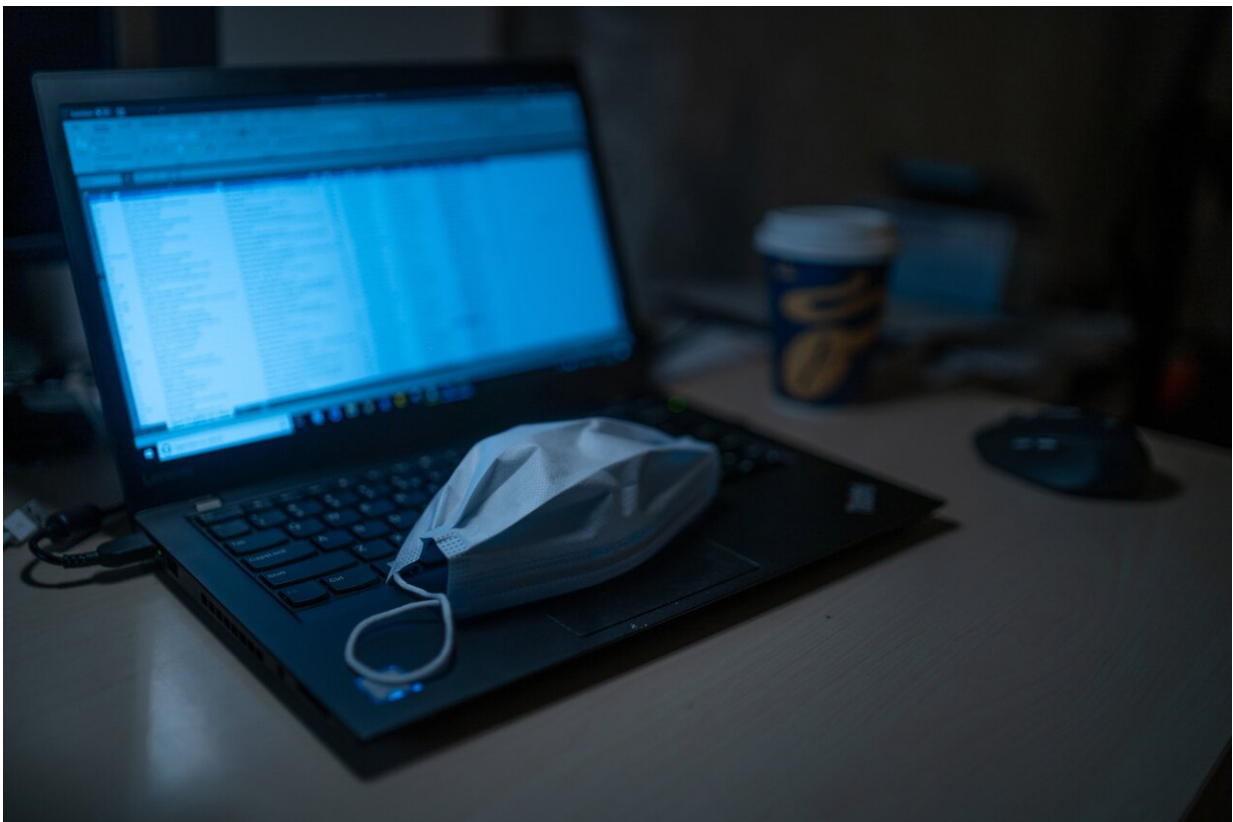


'It's almost like grooming': how anti-vaxxers, conspiracy theorists, and the far-right came together over COVID

September 21 2021, by Josh Roose



Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

Scenes of protesters clad in hi-vis jackets and shouting anti-vaccination slogans have dominated the news this week. As the ABC [reported](#):

"Some of those gathered held a banner reading 'freedom', while others sang the national anthem and chanted 'f*** the jab'."

Some attacked union offices, [drawing criticism](#) from officials such as ACTU chief Sally McManus, who described the protests as being orchestrated "by violent right-wing extremists and anti-vaccination activists."

These images may shock some but for researchers like me—who research far-right nationalist and conspiracy movements, and explore the online spaces where these people organize—these scenes came as no real surprise.

Far right nationalists, [anti-vaxxers](#), libertarians and conspiracy theorists have come together over COVID, and capitalized on the anger and uncertainty simmering in some sections of the community.

They appear to have found fertile ground particularly among men who feel alienated, fearful about their employment and who spend a lot of time at home scrolling [social media](#) and encrypted messaging apps.

I've already seen one Melbourne anti-lockdown group advertising another 'protest' outside CFMEU tomorrow in an encrypted chat.

It was only a few weeks ago when anti-vaxxers co-opted the concerns of some truckies & now it seems they are doing the same with tradies in Victoria.

— Eden Gillespie (@edengillespie) [September 20, 2021](#)

The latest in a continuum

It's important to see what's occurring with these protests as part of a

continuum rather than a series of unrelated incidents. This week's protests are related to anti-lockdown protests held in 2020, and earlier this year.

It was at first limited to the conspiracy theorist and anti-vaxxer crowd. Some were just upset by lockdowns but most of the planning conversation online was being led by anti-vaxxers and QAnon activists.

These movements thrive on anxiety, anger, a sense of alienation, a distrust in government and institutions. It's really no coincidence this is occurring most vigorously in Melbourne given what this city has been through with lockdowns.

It has really built momentum over the last year and, more recently, been infiltrated by far right groups.

The far right are capable recruiters

If you go back two years ago, anti-vaxxers were a tiny minority. They have grown significantly in size and influence online.

I have observed in my research the far right consciously appropriating the language of anti-vaxxers, of the conspiracy movements, seeking to exploit their anger and distrust.

I spend a lot of time on the encrypted messaging groups used by these groups and in the online spaces where they organize. I have seen the same names popping up, and growing use of hard right or far right national socialist iconography.

It is almost like grooming. The far right are a lot more capable of recruitment than we give them credit for. They have found an audience who are angry, frustrated and looking for someone to blame.

This is particularly the case among young men who are increasingly attracted to [right wing nationalism](#) and make up the majority of protesters. Victoria Police Commissioner Shane Patton has said the majority of protesters at the Saturday protest were [men aged 25-40](#), who came with violent intent.

Many of these groups share similar ideas: that there is a cabal of politicians and elites who are oppressing you. That freedom is at risk, that one must stand up for liberty, that there is a wealthy and unelected ruling class controlling you.

COVID—with all the fear, uncertainty, lockdowns, policing and employment impacts it brings—has helped bring these groups together.

Victoria police earlier this year [warned](#) a parliamentary inquiry into extremism that "online commentary on COVID-19 has provided a recruiting tool for right-wing extremist groups, linking those interested in alternative wellness, anti-vaccination and anti-authority conspiracy theories with white supremacist ideologies."

The far right has really sought to mobilize frustrated people and push them more toward right-wing narratives, particularly white nationalist narratives.

There is a [strong historical animosity toward trade unions](#) (as the vanguard of the political left) by the far right. It would be disingenuous to view the far right as unintelligent thugs. They are learned in the [history of national socialism](#) and fascism and the preconditions for its rise.

So you see the far right working very hard to undermine [trade unions](#) and the way they represent the organized working class. There is an attempt to undermine trust in trade unions and paint them as traitors and

sell-outs who are in bed with the government.

Among the protesters there was a really self conscious effort to represent themselves as themselves as tradies and workers. Some observed protest organizers encouraging people to wear hi-vis clothing to these rallies.

[@sallymcmanus](https://twitter.com/sallymcmanus) [@CFMEUJohnSetka](https://twitter.com/CFMEUJohnSetka)
pic.twitter.com/6Eqfg1wJvH

— Leftwing Bastard (@_SocialDemocrat) [September 21, 2021](#)

It's important to note the construction industry and trade union movement in general are incredibly diverse, and there will be different and competing views around vaccines, masks and lockdowns.

Some of these protesters actually are tradies, some may not be. Some are union members, others are not. But the broader point is there is a group of people who are incredibly angry about the situation they find themselves in, and resentment is proving fertile terrain for organized groups.

Where to from here?

This is not an easy knot to unpick, but there are three main approaches I think would really help.

The first is we really need to get people back to work. That is critical. People's self esteem and livelihood is tied up in work and the ability to put food on the table, in staying busy and socially connected (which is often via work).

By ensuring safe, secure employment for people, you really take away one of the main drivers of anger, resentment (and too much time to

scroll around social media) that is helping push people toward extremism.

The second is politicians need to think hard and fast about what they can do to help rebuild trust in them, in government and in our institutions. Politicians can't hide behind press conferences and press releases to get their message out. They need to get out and build trust, face-to-face with the community. Of course, that has been constrained by lockdown but this work is urgent and important. Politicians need to lead and create relationships with the community again.

The third thing is we as a society need to think carefully about social media, and perhaps about regulation. We need a long-term approach to media literacy training, to teach media literacy in schools and to educate people about social media echo chambers.

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