

# COVID-19 health disaster and political crisis intensify in Australia

Mike Head  
23 March 2020

A dramatic increase in officially-reported COVID-19 infections in Australia, taking the same trajectory as the exponentially rising toll in Italy and internationally, has further exposed the criminal lack of preventive public health measures by the federal and state governments, while forcing them into partial economic shutdowns.

Yesterday the soaring rate of infections triggered an open rift in the self-styled “national cabinet” formed by Liberal-National Prime Minister Scott Morrison and his state and territory counterparts, five of whom are from the Labor Party.

The premiers of the two most populous and badly-infected states, New South Wales (NSW) and Victoria, yesterday announced shutdowns of all “non-essential” industries. But Morrison browbeat them at last night’s online cabinet meeting into agreeing to only limited closures. Major infection sites such as shopping malls, schools, factories and mines will remain open across the country.

What none of the government heads mentioned is that, at the current rate of infections, which are quadrupling each week, the number will exceed 1.4 million within five weeks. Just yesterday, another 281 people were recorded as testing positive, bringing the total to 1,354 by last night.

A fortnight ago, COVID-19 cases in Australia totalled 91. A week ago, it was 376. The number will exceed 1,500 by tonight. Rather than “flattening the curve,” as the governments claim, their measures have permitted the total to skyrocket. Seven people have died so far.

These figures seriously understate the true spread of the virus because testing is being strictly limited to those already displaying COVID-19 symptoms or who have been in “close contact” with a confirmed infected patient.

All the government heads, Liberal-National and Labor alike, are trying to blame the public, especially young people, for allegedly ignoring “social distancing” messages. But the record shows that it is these governments and the capitalist class they serve that are responsible for the spiralling health disaster.

These governments have muddled and undercut the public

health precautions by their indifferent responses, driven only by private profit concerns. Just over a week ago, Morrison was encouraging people to join football crowds. It is no wonder that the already historic levels of distrust of the political leaders, accentuated by the bushfire catastrophe, have deepened.

Even while Morrison and the Labor leaders denounced people for going to beaches and bars, they were still sabotaging their own quarantine systems, always in the interests of corporate profit. One of the most grotesque examples was the federal and NSW governments allowing five huge cruise ships to dock in Sydney this month and herd passengers off without any infection checks.

In one case alone, that of the *Ruby Princess*, about 2,700 passengers, some already displaying COVID-19 symptoms, were rapidly offloaded last Thursday. At least 23 have since tested positive for the virus, too late to avert its spread.

Far from any concern about the lives and livelihoods of millions of people, the total preoccupation of the government leaders is with trying to shore up major corporations, such as the cruise line operators, and the financial elite as a whole. This includes forcing school teachers to keep working in dangerous classrooms, while handing billions of dollars to the banks and business.

From midday today, all states and territories have shut pubs and clubs, as well as cinemas, nightclubs, casinos, gyms, indoor sporting venues, churches and places of worship, while cafes and restaurants can only be open for takeaway orders. Yet schools are supposed to remain open, although the outrage of teachers and parents has forced governments to allow parents to keep their children home from school without penalty (see: “Australian state of Victoria shuts down school system, other states remain open”).

Each government, except for Victoria and NSW, has shut its borders or imposed tight restrictions on movement. Even here, exceptions are being made for big business. The Western Australian government has given a carve-out to the mining companies, allowing 2,500 fly-in, fly-out workers to

continue to enter the state to work on mine sites and oil and gas rigs.

To try to boost the financial elite, the federal government announced another \$66 billion economic “survival” package yesterday, but it was immediately rendered impotent by the shutdown announcements. Over the past 10 days, Morrison’s government has allocated \$198 billion in such packages, three-quarters of it for corporate tax breaks and subsidies, on top of billions of dollars more in state and territory government handouts.

The cynical pretence by Morrison and the Labor leaders that these measures would help keep workers employed was shattered this morning. Massive queues formed outside the government’s Centrelink welfare offices and the MyGov website crashed. Hundreds of thousands of workers, laid off already by businesses large and small, have started anxiously lining up to register for dole payments.

At the same time, not a cent of the multi-billion dollar packages is to be spent on addressing the ever-more urgent emergency situation in the health system, which will soon be overwhelmed.

Even if the spread of infection is limited to the official “best-case” scenario of 20 percent of the population (that is, five million people), the estimated 2,023 intensive care beds across the country fitted with ventilators could not meet the need. Judging by international experience, one million people could require hospitalisation, needing up to 50,000 ventilators.

This health system breakdown is well underway. Doctors, nurses, paramedics and aged care workers are reporting acute shortages of personal protection equipment, such as masks and gowns, and other essential medical resources. In many cases, supplies have dried up because of the worsening global pandemic, underscoring the lack of preparation by governments in Australia and around the world.

Many people will die, or suffer life-long health damage, as a direct result of the big business-driven gutting of public health services for decades, and the refusal of governments to provide the necessary medical facilities, despite waves of pandemics, such as SARS, since the turn of the century.

Under yesterday’s “survival” package, small and medium-sized businesses can apply for wage subsidies of up to \$100,000 each—if they keep workers employed—and for government-guaranteed loans capped at \$250,000 each. But as the Centrelink queues demonstrate, employers have quickly thrown vast numbers of workers onto the scrapheap.

Nicki Hutley of Deloitte Access Economics told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation that 75 percent of jobs would be eliminated in affected industries. Neither wage subsidies nor loans would avert that, she said. By earlier estimates, more than two million workers will soon be

jobless or “under-employed.”

These workers, like other welfare recipients, will have to wait until April 27 to receive an extra \$550 a fortnight in Jobseeker (formerly Newstart) payments. After keeping Newstart recipients on sub-poverty level benefits for years, the federal government will double the payments from that date, but just for six months. This will be far too little for most workers, whose households are deeply in debt, mainly due to exorbitant mortgage repayments or rents.

Likewise, all welfare recipients will get a second one-off extra payment of \$750, but not until July. Morrison contemptuously claimed that these pittances meant the government was “supercharging our safety net and supporting the most vulnerable to the impacts of the crisis.”

All this is being done with the bipartisan support of the Labor Party. Its leader Anthony Albanese and other parliamentary leaders joined hands at a meeting with Morrison and his senior ministers yesterday to agree to quickly legislate the government’s economic packages today in a rump session of parliament and then shut it down indefinitely.

This is part of an anti-democratic and authoritarian official response. Acutely aware of widespread discontent, the federal and state governments are deploying police units, joined by military forces, onto the streets in the name of enforcing shutdown and quarantine measures.

Morrison told a media conference yesterday: “I’ve already had the Defence Forces being deployed into the states to assist with medical check-ups and chase-ups, contact tracing.”

Writing in News Entertainment newspapers on the weekend, George Megalogenis summed up the fears in ruling circles. “The question of recession is now redundant; the challenge is to maintain social order for the six months of Australia’s isolation.”

If the cash splashed on the banks and employers was instead poured into the health system, lives could still be saved, but that would be intolerable to the capitalist elite. This shows the necessity for the working class, including health and education workers, to take matters into their own hands, as part of the fight for the complete socialist reorganisation of society.



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