Latest Australian COVID-19 measures driven by concern about profits, not health

Mike Head
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Even as Australia's COVID-19 infection rate accelerated, the country's emergency "national cabinet" last night adopted further inadequate and contradictory partial shutdown measures and policies designed to benefit big business.

All the federal and state government leaders involved, Liberal-National and Labor alike, are shutting selected industries, but keeping retail shops, major businesses and schools open for the sake of corporate profit, despite the ever-more present danger to public health.

Today, these governments intensified their collaboration by appointing a COVID-19 Coordination Commission, led by corporate leaders, with unspecified powers to "solve problems" in the "private and public sectors" created by the pandemic. The military will be "at the disposal" of the commission, Prime Minister Scott Morrison announced.

This potentially extensive state intervention into the economy demonstrates the failure of the capitalist market system to cope with the disaster. However, even if new arrangements are needed to overcome critical medical shortages, they will remain dictated by the profit-making requirements of the corporations, rather than the needs and democratic rights of workers.

To ensure that the trade unions will continue to police this corporate-driven response, against increasingly suffering and angry workers, the commission's board features ex-Labor cabinet minister Greg Combet, a former long-time Australian Council of Trade Unions secretary.

Announcing the latest restrictions at a media conference last night, the prime minister channeled US President Donald Trump, voicing more concern about keeping "the economy" going than protecting the health and lives of millions of working-class people.

Trump yesterday sent the share markets surging by declaring that he wants the US economy "raring to go" by Easter, regardless of the rising coronavirus death toll across America.

Morrison's line was only slightly less blatant. First, in an attempt to blame ordinary people for the sky-rocketing infection rate, Morrison said his "common sense" message was: "Stay at home." He "strongly encouraged" people to leave their homes only for "essential reasons."

Yet, he then contradicted himself. He declared: "But it is important for people to go to the shop. It is important to go to the shopping centre ... It's also important for our economy that it continues to operate and function as much as possible."

By "economy," Trump and Morrison mean financial and corporate profits—which capitalist governments everywhere are desperately enhancing by pouring billions of dollars into handouts and tax breaks—not the millions of workers being thrown out of work by these same corporations.

Morrison spoke on behalf of all the state and territory government leaders, none of whom voiced any dissent. While Labor state premiers, such as Victoria's Daniel Andrews, feign dismay over the impact of the health crisis on working people, they are just as intent on bailing out the banks and employers.

Equally revealing was Morrison's denunciation of Australian Broadcasting Corporation political editor Andrew Probyn for pointing out the "really incongruous" decision to keep schools open, making them "human petri dishes for a virus."

The prime minister condemned Probyn, and by implication all journalists, in a threatening manner. Morrison said it was "very important" that "media don't use that sort of alarmist language. I don't think it helps."

Morrison claimed that such talk "can cause unnecessary alarm" at odds with the "medical advice" that the government leaders cite as authority for their limited measures. He insisted schools must stay open so that "essential" workers—including those in the now-unsafe factories—could be kept on the job.

But another journalist then revealed that last Sunday the national cabinet received advice from a group of 22 health experts and lawyers, commissioned by the federal chief medical officer, to launch an "immediate and hard line lockdown" in order to "flatten the [infection] curve immediately."

The journalist asked: "Why was that advice dismissed, and what was the discussion of that advice?"

Morrison answered with his most explicit Trump-style response.

"We're dealing with two crises," he said. "We're dealing with a health crisis that has caused an economic crisis. And I am very concerned about the economic crisis that could also take a great toll on people's lives, not just their livelihoods … I'm as concerned about those outcomes as I am about the health outcomes of managing the outbreak of the coronavirus."

In reality, Morrison and his fellow government leaders have such contempt for both the lives and livelihoods of workers that their failures to take the necessary steps to avert a catastrophe—such as mass testing and the urgent equipping of clinics and hospitals—have led to infection spread and then business shutdowns.

That contempt is being furthered displayed in the Great

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Depression-style queues of jobless workers at the government's Centrelink welfare offices. The new unemployed are forced to line up for hours because of the cuts and privatisations throughout the public service over decades, just like the chronic under-funding of public hospitals and health services.

The urgent needs of these workers for immediate income support could be met by diverting into their bank accounts the billions of dollars going to business, but the governments' response is the total opposite.

Both the health and jobs tolls are rising rapidly. Coronavirus infections are soaring toward 3,000, now doubling every two to three days. The deaths rose yesterday to eight, but health and epidemiological experts warn that fatalities are due to surge.

Thousands of doctors have signed petitions, and health workers are speaking out, warning about the lack of basic resources, such as medical masks, personal protection gear, ventilators and intensive care beds needed to stop the health system being overwhelmed, as in Italy.

For these dire needs to be met, industries must be taken under public ownership and democratic workers' control to produce the critically required equipment, but that is anathema to capitalist governments.

Likewise, the corporations laying off workers by the thousands—such as Virgin, which yesterday axed 8,000 jobs, or 80 percent of its workforce—must be taken under social ownership, with all workers guaranteed their incomes.

All the resources exist for this, but instead the federal and state governments are handing over mountains of cash—that is, social wealth—to prop up the financial and corporate elites.

The mass unemployment already caused by the closures of hospitality and travel industries will worsen as a result of last night's expanded restrictions.

Businesses and activities ordered to close from tonight range from real estate auctions to nail and beauty salons and other personal service providers, except hairdressers and barbers. Galleries, museums, libraries, youth centres, community halls, clubs, social sports and swimming pools are also closing.

The schools, however, must stay open, with the agreement of the main teachers' trade union, the Australian Education Union (AEU). Its leaders met with Morrison today in what he described as "positive" talks to work out a deal to force most teachers to remain in the classrooms.

Morrison today praised the AEU and other unions for their "fine spirit" in working hand in glove with the governments and employers.

Despite some apparent rifts between Morrison and some state premiers on Sunday as the calamity intensified, the Labor Party and the Greens collaborated closely with his Liberal-National government in parliament on Monday.

In an extraordinary one-day rump session, consisting of bare quorums in each house, all the MPs helped push through a huge package of bills that authorise the spending of $189 billion, overwhelmingly for the benefit of the banks, finance houses and businesses.

In fact, Labor leader Anthony Albanese and his shadow ministers were so supportive that they moved an amendment to boost to $40 billion a special discretionary fund that the government is free to use to hand more money to big business.

Another feature of the bills was the expansion of executive power, including to change welfare benefit requirements and cut-off rules by decree, and to further boost the police-intelligence-military agencies, whose function is to suppress the mounting social discontent.

While the Greens expressed disquiet over several items, such as giving private schools another multi-billion dollar boost, they backed all the pro-business legislation.

"It is our job today to pass a package of bills that will not only stimulate our economy but make sure no-one is left behind," Greens leader Adam Bandt told the House of Representatives.

Bandt spoke for all the parliamentary representatives of the capitalist ruling class, declaring: "At this moment, we need to be able to trust our leaders and our institutions because lives depend on it."

The only concern in these ruling circles is that the social distress will fuel the already rising disaffection with the political establishment.

Millions of working-class households, having lost their livelihoods, are not just being "left behind." They are being financially ruined by the capitalist ruling class, whose brutal response to the COVID-19 disaster was summed up by Gerry Harvey, the billionaire owner of a large retail chain.

"Why are we so scared about getting this virus?" he declared on the "60 Minutes" television program on Sunday. "It's pretty much nothing to get scared of."

When the interviewer mentioned the thousands of families, particularly in Italy and China, who are affected by it, Harvey replied: "But that's there, we're here."

Harvey said sales had increased at his Harvey Norman stores and described the crisis as "an opportunity." He gloated: "Our sales in freezers are up 300 percent. And what about air purifiers? Up 100 percent."

This is the authentic voice of the financial and corporate aristocracy, whose profits interests all capitalist governments are seeking to satisfy at the expense of the working class.

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