

Unprecedented police and military powers implemented in Australian pandemic response

Mike Head
1 April 2020

Quarantines, border closures and lockdowns are being imposed by governments in Australia to try to curb the rapid spread of the COVID-19 virus, activating extraordinary powers never before seen in the country, except during the two world wars.

After weeks of delaying and denying the need for shutdowns and restrictive measures, primarily in order to keep workers on the job to generate corporate profits, the federal and state governments are implementing measures that have a definite police-state character.

While the lockdown measures have become necessary to try to contain the pandemic, they are being enforced in the most heavy-handed manner. They are also being applied arbitrarily and inconsistently, with various exceptions in favour of big business interests, and imposed via frequently-changing ministerial decrees issued without any democratic input.

These measures, adopted by a bipartisan “national cabinet,” also set precedents and create a political atmosphere that can and will be used by the same capitalist governments to bolster the police-military apparatus to suppress rising social discontent.

This underscores the necessity for the working class to take control of the pandemic response out of the hands of the capitalist governments and their repressive apparatuses. A democratically-controlled workers’ government would reorganise society along socialist lines, on the basis of human need, not corporate profit. This would include effective restrictions, quarantines and other urgently-needed measures to avert millions of deaths and genuinely protect public health and safety, implemented with popular consultation and input.

Each of the current governments has activated sweeping powers, embedded in health and emergency legislation in recent years. These include issuing directives that change

laws and overturn basic rights overnight, threatening working people with heavy fines or imprisonment for infringing social distancing and self-isolation rules.

People can be arrested for leaving their homes without an officially-accepted reason or for “gathering” in groups of more than two people, even inside their own homes. Police and military personnel are patrolling streets, manning airports and knocking on residents’ doors to enforce isolation orders.

Depending on the state or territory, police have vague and unchecked discretion to issue on-the-spot fines of \$1,000 or more, or to arrest and prosecute people, who can be fined up to \$19,800 or face six months in prison. Passengers arriving from overseas are being forcibly escorted into quarantine for 14 days, as are people crossing some state borders.

New South Wales (NSW), the Australian Capital Territory and Victoria are the only states and territories to remain open for interstate travel. Only Australian permanent residents and citizens are allowed into the country, throwing into doubt the future of about two million temporary residents, including students, workers and touring backpackers.

The same governments, Labor and Liberal-National alike, are still failing to provide the essential protective means to contain the pandemic, including mass testing and the isolation and care of infected people. At the same time, they are compelling workers in many factories, call centres, mine sites, construction projects and other industries to labour in often unsafe and unsanitised workplaces, exempted from social distancing rules.

Just weeks ago, government leaders from Prime Minister Scott Morrison down were urging people to go shopping or join football crowds, or allowing cruise ships to unload passengers without health checks, leading to

hundreds of new infections.

Yesterday, in Sydney, a riot squad unit was deployed to order people off a beach. At a park, a convoy of five police cars with flashing lights dispersed people getting some fresh air and sunshine, even those who were adhering to social distancing laws. In Perth, police flew drones over parks warning people to go home.

Today, the federal government announced that the military's involvement would be ramped up. Defence Minister Linda Reynolds stated: "The Australian Defence Force (ADF) is expanding its support to the national COVID-19 pandemic response with the establishment of Operation COVID-19 ASSIST."

Reynolds said the operation, led by Major General Paul Kenny, comprised seven state-and-territory-based task groups. "There are already around 570 ADF members providing support including contact tracing, planning assistance, and assisting police with mandatory quarantine arrangements for international air arrivals," she said.

As with the mobilisation of the military during the summer bushfire catastrophe, these operations are designed to accustom the public to the sight of troops on the streets. This is under conditions of deepening political discontent and signs of working-class resistance to the dictates of employers, such as last Thursday's walkout by Coles warehouse workers in Melbourne over unsafe conditions.

That walkout is part of a broader movement of the working class globally. In recent days, Instacart, Amazon and Whole Foods workers in the United States, Italian and Spanish auto and steel workers, British postal workers, French bus drivers and supermarket workers and Brazilian call-centre workers have struck to demand the closure of non-essential workplaces or protection for workers engaged in critical operations.

In Spain last week, police assaulted steelworkers in the Basque country protesting against being forced back to unsafe, non-essential jobs as large firms demanded millions of workers needlessly go to work to keep producing profits.

Last week, Morrison's federal Liberal-National government declared a first-ever "biosecurity emergency," giving it powers to issue sweeping directives, backed by threats of five years' jail. Under the Biosecurity Act, the government can now impose "any requirement" on people, including forced evacuations and restrictions on movement. "Biosecurity enforcement officers" can enter and search premises without a warrant or consent.

In effect, the government has seized the national emergency powers that Morrison previously demanded during the bushfire calamity, together with expanded powers to mobilise the military domestically.

How these measures are being implemented varies in each state and territory, but the laws are basically similar. People are permitted to leave their homes only for four types of "essential" purposes, to go to work or school, to buy food or other essential goods and services, to exercise, or to seek or provide medical or caring services.

Victoria's deputy police commissioner Shane Patton said on Tuesday: "I want to be absolutely clear ... police officers will still use discretion. But my expectation moving forward from here today [is] that this is very cut and dry: if you do not fit in with one of those four categories, you will actually receive a significant infringement notice over \$1,600."

Under emergency legislation passed by the Queensland parliament, paralleled by similar measures in other states and territories, an "emergency officer" can order the detention of a person for 14 days without the right to a court review.

In NSW, the state Liberal government imposed the latest "stay at home" regime by issuing the Public Health (COVID-19 Restrictions on Gathering and Movement) Order 2020 under the state's Public Health Act 2010. In Victoria, the state Labor government issued "Stay at Home Directions" under the state's Public Health and Wellbeing Act 2008.

Civil liberties organisations are warning of the anti-democratic dangers of these vast powers. Human Rights Law Centre senior lawyer Alice Drury told the Special Broadcasting Service: "This crisis must not be seen as an opportunity to advance the infringement of our democratic freedoms. We cannot allow a situation in which Australians emerge from this over-policed and under state surveillance with their democratic rights curtailed."

Yet this is exactly what the ruling class has in mind. Having been triggered, the emergency measures establish precedents for future use, adding to the framework of repressive laws and mass surveillance adopted since 2001, initially under the cover of the "war on terror."



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact