

Australian governments prepare to push workers back into unsafe workplaces

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Even as the COVID-19 pandemic worsens dramatically around the world, and Australia's death toll rises, the country's "national cabinet" is drawing up plans to get workers back on the job, regardless of unsafe conditions.

Throughout the pages of the financial press in Australia and globally, behind the backs of most of the population, calculations are being made, in explicit dollar terms, about how many lives must be sacrificed in order to restore the profit-making process.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison and his state and territory counterparts in the national cabinet are trying to mislead and condition public opinion to accept the premature lifting of lockdowns and other restrictions.

Morrison declared on Tuesday that support measures for businesses and workers "cannot go on forever." He foreshadowed a scaling-down of social and health measures through "trial-type relief of restrictions."

At the same media conference, the federal Chief Medical Officer Brendan Murphy said: "We have focal outbreaks. The one that worries us most of all is the community transmission in Sydney." Reportedly, health officials are tracking evidence of locally-acquired "community transmission" of the virus, with more than 600 cases under investigation.

Nonetheless, Morrison promoted the notion of lifting restrictions. He said "no one point of data" would determine when social-isolation measures would be eased, and it would likely be a staggered exit strategy, from state to state.

Yesterday, media reports revealed the national cabinet was considering plans to use Western Australia (WA) and South Australia as "guinea pigs" for a broader easing of restrictions, by invoking the relatively low number of confirmed cases in both states to rollback lockdown measures. Testing rates in WA

are the second-lowest of any state in the country, underscoring the fact that these plans are based on woefully-inadequate data.

For now, Morrison has urged people to "stay at home" over Easter. "Failure to do so this weekend would completely undo everything we have achieved so far together, and potentially worse," he said, essentially placing the blame for any new wave of infections on ordinary people.

Morrison gave an indication of the pressure being applied by big business for a full return to work. "The states and territories and I are very conscious that the path out of this is not just avoiding the peak (in new infections) but getting back to some sense of normality," he said.

The *Australian* reported on Wednesday that some New South Wales (NSW) state government ministers are "agitating for the state to recalibrate social-distancing measures" because they are "damaging the economy" and "unsustainable."

In a meeting of NSW members of parliament, calls were made for the adoption of the disastrous "herd immunity" policy, initially adopted by Boris Johnson's British government, which essentially means exposing the majority of the population to the virus. Thousands of people have died in the UK as a result of this doctrine.

A senior government MP put it crudely: "People have to get sick for this to pass."

This could involve partial lifting of social-distancing restrictions for people supposedly less vulnerable to the virus, such as schoolchildren, even though young people have died from the illness in the UK and elsewhere.

A "senior health official" told the newspaper that school-aged children and young adults were "the least

likely to have symptoms—it would start to increase the herd immunity for the country.”

The official said: “The issue for us in Australia is that at some point you’ve got to start weighing up the consequences. If this goes on for six to 12 months, that could do much greater destruction to our economy and lifestyle than the virus is doing to us.”

The types of capitalist calculations behind these moves were displayed in the *Australian Financial Review* last Monday. Sam Lovick, former chief economist for CSL, a biotech company, asserted that if restrictions were continued for six months, the economic cost would probably add up to \$240 billion.

Compared to his estimates of the number of lives that would be saved, he suggested, “you can reach the somewhat alarming figure of \$6 million or more per life saved.”

He urged the newspaper’s readers: “Let’s not be shy about balancing the economy against health. Governments do it all the time. The Pharmaceutical Benefits Advisory Committee rejects 69 percent of anti-cancer drugs because they are not cost-effective.”

The economist gave the example of a drug that would cost “more than \$30,000–\$70,000 for each (quality adjusted) year of life saved.” He explained: “Anything higher is too much; \$4 million for a drug that saves a newborn for 80 happy years appears to be the yardstick.”

Lovick advocated the strict quarantining of those people mostly likely to “need intensive care and most likely to die,” combined with allowing COVID-19 to “spread through the community in a controlled fashion.” Even though this would place hospitals “under stress.”

While Lovick admitted that not enough was known about COVID-19 to make reliable predictions, his proposals “could save 90 percent of the lives saved by our current aggressive social distancing stance at much lower cost.” By implication, the other 10 percent of deaths would be an acceptable price to pay.

Australian Broadcasting Corporation business editor Ian Verrender commented that Lovick’s view reflected wider processes under capitalism. “Ultimately, the decision comes down to dollars. What monetary value do you place on a human being, on life itself?” he asked.

“Callous as they are, these decisions are being made

right now, in Canberra, London, Rome, Beijing, Madrid, Washington, Jakarta, Johannesburg: everywhere that COVID-19 has invaded populations.”

Health experts are warning of the likely death toll from the “herd immunity” doctrine. Infectious disease physician and microbiologist Peter Collignon told the *Australian*: “[T]he trouble with the idea of building up herd immunity, which I think Sweden seems to be following, is you’ve got to get to 60 or 70 percent of the population infected. The trouble with that is that with the mortality rate of this virus, that’s an awful lot of deaths.”

James McCaw, an infectious disease modeller with the Doherty Institute, said that if social-distancing measures were relaxed, the numbers of infections would skyrocket. “We know that our population is still largely susceptible, and so if we relaxed and went back to normal we would see a rapid and explosive resurgence in epidemic activity,” he said.

These developments express two irreconcilably opposed forces. For the ruling capitalist class, workers must be put back to work as quickly as possible so that their labour power can be exploited to once again produce profits and wealth. For the working class, it is a question of saving lives and stopping all non-essential production, which means restructuring economic life along socialist lines, on the basis of social need, not private profit.



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