

Australian governments pushing for premature return to work

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17 April 2020

At a meeting of the expanded “national cabinet” yesterday afternoon, the federal Coalition government, along with state Liberal and Labor governments, discussed plans to wind back lockdown measures over the coming months. They made clear that this would be aimed at forcing workers back on the job to resume the flow of corporate profits, despite the risk of a full-blown outbreak of COVID-19.

Speaking to the media after the meeting, Prime Minister Scott Morrison declared that the governments were preparing measures for the “road out” of the current crisis. He couched his comments in terms of reversing the dire impact on business activity of lockdowns instituted over the past month.

The announcement was prepared by a joint media-government campaign over the past fortnight, proclaiming that Australia has succeeded in “flattening the curve” of infections and slowing the spread of the coronavirus.

The claims are highly dubious, under conditions where most states still have highly restrictive testing criteria.

In New South Wales, for instance, the most populous state with the highest number of infections, criteria were “expanded” at the beginning of the month, but only to health and aged care workers showing symptoms and those in areas with a high number of confirmed infections. In other words, most people with symptoms are denied testing, while the estimated 35 to 50 percent of infected individuals who are asymptomatic have no prospect of being examined.

The government announcements, moreover, were made amid some of the lowest testing rates since early March. The day before the cabinet meeting, just 4,851 tests were conducted across the country, compared with more than 16,000 on March 29. From Monday to Thursday, only 1,000 tests per day were conducted in Victoria, which has a population of more than 6.3 million.

Clusters continue to emerge, including at two hospitals in Tasmania last week and at a number of medical facilities in Victoria.

Modelling released by the Actuaries Institute yesterday, based on World Health Organisation data, suggested that there may have been 20,000 people infected with the virus on April 9, well above the official figure of several thousand active cases. The report stated that community transmission of the virus is

likely far more widespread than is indicated by official data.

Despite this, Morrison declared at the press conference that while existing lockdown measures would remain in place for the next four weeks, they will be reviewed and likely eased late next month.

Morrison outlined three policies that would supposedly manage the virus as lockdown measures are wound back. He claimed that testing would be dramatically increased, which raises the obvious question of why this has not yet been carried out.

The prime minister stated that clusters of confirmed infections could be met with localised lockdowns to be enforced by the Australian Defence Force—another indication of the repressive policies being prepared.

The government is also rolling out a mobile phone app that will track at all times those who sign up. This would supposedly allow the authorities to identify the phone number of anyone that a confirmed case has been in close proximity to for 15 minutes or longer. The measure, based on a model developed by the police-state regime in Singapore, would represent a major escalation of mass surveillance and other ongoing invasions of privacy.

The prime minister and Chief Medical Officer Brendan Murphy gave their most explicit comments to date on the “strategy” that has underlined the woefully-inadequate government response to the pandemic. They declared that they were not seeking to eradicate the virus, because of the negative business consequences of a sharp lockdown. Instead they were attempting to suppress it.

The admission underscores why it took so long for the state and federal governments to introduce lockdown measures last month. It indicates that the governments are preparing to force workers back onto the job while the virus circulates for the foreseeable future and periodic outbreaks become a “new normal.”

It is clear that teachers have been selected as the “guinea pigs” of the back to work campaign, which threatens to cause thousands of unnecessary deaths. On Wednesday evening, Morrison delivered a video message to teachers, hectoring them to ensure that schools remain open.

Morrison made clear that this was aimed at resuming business

activity, cynically declaring that teachers could not force parents to decide whether to “put food on the table” by going out to work or staying at home to look after their children.

In reality, it is the federal and state governments, which have focused their response to the economic breakdown on providing billions to the corporations as they lay off workers, that are responsible for the deepening social hardship, not teachers.

Comments in the *Australian* and other media outlets of the financial elite were blunter, noting that reopening the schools was crucial to “kickstarting the economy,” and creating the conditions for employees to be pushed back into their workplaces.

Victoria is viewed as a test case, with the state Labor government of Premier Daniel Andrews forcing teachers back to the schools this week, despite widespread anger over a lack of safety precautions. Teachers are being compelled to go to schools, where they risk infection, while developing online curricula for the majority of students who are still learning remotely, greatly increasing their workload.

In New South Wales, the state Liberal government has signalled that it will begin a staged reintroduction of face-to-face classes starting on May 12. This is in line with calls from the state’s Teachers Federation for Year 12 and kindergarten students to begin attending schools again. As in every state, the unions have collaborated closely with the government, brushing aside the concerns of the teachers they falsely claim to represent.

In the Northern Territory, teachers are being forced to take classroom lessons and to prepare online classes. Measures for a full reopening of the schools are doubtless being discussed in other states and territories.

The stated rationale for resuming face-to-face teaching, that schools are unlikely centres of infection, is highly dubious. Earlier this month, a cluster of over 70 infections emerged at Marist College in the New Zealand city of Auckland. A number of schools in New South Wales and South Australia were forced to close prior to the end of Term One after cases were detected.

In reality, teachers are being subjected to dangerous conditions as the first step in imposing similar conditions on broader sections of the workforce. At the same time, tens of thousands of construction workers remain on the job at the behest of governments and the unions, despite the impossibility of practicing social distancing.

Behind the scenes, the ruling elite and its representatives are discussing how many people will be allowed to die to minimise any impact on corporate profits.

In an interview with Morrison last night, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s Leigh Sales noted that there have been no deaths under the 50- to 59-year-old cohort, and asked: “Is it fair to say that the people who are bearing the hardest burden of the economic shutdown are not the people who are at

the most serious health risk?”

Sales asked whether it might be possible, as some business leaders have suggested, to “return to a sort of normal existence for everyone under 60 and lockdown measures restricted to older Australians and younger people with serious health issues.”

An article in the *Australian Financial Review* by Sam Lovick, headlined, “The next stage must be to let the virus spread,” was even more explicit. Hailing government moves to end the lockdowns, he wrote: “In the absence of a vaccine or a cure, the best policy involves a managed increase in spread so that some degree of herd immunity develops, seeking to protect those most at risk while it does.”

“How might we achieve this? One policy that is unlikely to work is to try to prevent every death. Why not? Because to do so we would need to eliminate infections entirely. That can only be done with severe and prolonged social distancing at prodigious economic cost (2 percent of GDP per month for at least 10 months, at least \$400 billion).”

Lovick detailed two scenarios, allowing a “managed spread” of the pandemic. He claimed that under the first model, of a gradual easing of lockdown measures, “64,000 lives would be saved” because intensive care units would not be overwhelmed despite a rise in infections.

Under his second scenario, “Some 3,000 fewer lives are saved, largely because we are short around 500 ICU beds for one month. But the impact on GDP is much smaller at 4.1 per cent (\$85 billion). The cost per life saved falls to \$1.4 million. The cost of saving those additional 3,000 lives is \$9 million each, more than society is normally willing to pay.”

In other words, the corporate and financial elite, and the governments that represent them are preparing to inflict thousands of deaths to shore up their bottom lines. This underscores the necessity for workers to immediately develop their own response to the crisis. As a first step, new organisations of struggle, independent of the corporatised trade unions, must be developed everywhere, to lead a fight against any premature return to work.



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