

Despite anticipating more deaths, Australian governments demand return to work

Mike Head
28 April 2020

Like their counterparts internationally, Australia's governments are pushing for a rapid full return to work, in order to restore corporate profits, knowing full well that the result will be new COVID-19 outbreaks and deaths.

This became explicit this morning, even as the global pandemic worsened, soaring past three million cases and 210,000 deaths, and with four continuing outbreaks in Australia sending the country's death toll to 84.

Gladys Berejiklian, the premier of New South Wales (NSW), the most populous state, said she expected an increase in virus cases as her government lifted restrictions. She announced that this would start by allowing people to begin visiting each other at home from this Friday, encouraging retail shops to open their doors and reopening all the state's schools within a month.

"I anticipate during May, we will see more cases and that's because when you increase activity, when you see people move around more frequently, you will see more cases," she said.

Berejiklian claimed that the health system "will be able to cope with that" because "we've used this time during April to build up the capacity get the extra PPE [personal protective equipment]."

This would "make sure that we're ready, whether it's in schools, whether it's people going shopping or whether it's people now visiting houses two adults at a time."

Berejiklian pointed to the profit-driven basis of this drive. She boasted that her government's decision to start reopening school classrooms from May 11—just two weeks away—had already encouraged retail stores to open their doors.

Echoing comments by all the other federal, state and territory government leaders, Berejiklian sought to shift the blame onto ordinary people for any disastrous results. "We don't want to see the numbers suddenly spike up because people are being irresponsible," she said.

Any catastrophic "spikes" will not be the fault of

individuals breaching what remains of social distancing protocols, but of the government and corporate chiefs. They are effectively opening the way for the sweeping aside of restrictions by business operators.

Above all, they are insisting that all workers go back into workplaces, with school teachers and retail workers in the frontline, alongside the construction workers, miners and factory workers, most of whom have been forced by their employers and trade unions to stay on the job throughout the pandemic.

For all the pretence of being concerned for health and lives, the calculations of accepting "more cases" are being made directly in the interests of big business, which is demanding that all workers be coerced back into workplaces, regardless of the dangers.

As the *Australian Financial Review* reported this morning, the major employer groups are urging a more rapid and uniform return to work across the continent. The Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry called for a more coordinated approach and the Business Council of Australia (BCA), representing the biggest companies, said "economic recovery" would depend on how "safely and quickly" the restrictions were eased.

Berejiklian's call to allow "more cases" came just 24 hours after the BCA released a corporate "analysis" suggesting that if all COVID-19 restrictions were lifted after a month, the pandemic's economic cost would be 10 percent of gross domestic product (GDP), or \$197.3 billion. Six months of shutdown, lasting until September, would cost \$402 billion this year—20 percent of GDP.

These calculations, literally weighing up the "cost" of saving lives, are based on the impact on corporate profits, not the burden being imposed on workers by way of mass unemployment, pay cuts and destruction of basic working conditions. In fact, the governments and employers are seeking to exploit the suffering being inflicted on working class households to coerce workers back into workplaces,

with the cuts to full-time jobs, wages and conditions entrenched permanently.

While Berejiklian is from the Liberal-National Coalition, like Prime Minister Scott Morrison, this is a bipartisan drive. The Labor Party government leaders in Queensland, Western Australia and the Northern Territory were in the front of the pack this week, lifting multiple COVID-19 restrictions to allow non-essential shopping, outdoor gatherings, picnics, beach trips and other social outings.

West Australian Premier Mark McGowan indicated the base commercial considerations, including real estate revenues, behind such decisions. He said easing restrictions would allow up to 10 people at once to go to house open-for-inspections and housing display villages.

This rush is intensifying despite new deaths, currently concentrated in four COVID-19 clusters, illustrating the grave danger posed to the population. As Berejiklian also revealed at her media conference this morning, a seventh resident of the Anglicare Newmarch House aged care facility at Caddens, near Penrith, in western Sydney, died overnight. A further staff member tested positive for the virus, taking the total infections at the facility to 54, including 34 residents and 20 staff.

In Tasmania, four new cases linked to the island state's North West Regional Hospital were confirmed on Monday. Of the small state's 11 deaths, 10 have resulted from this still unexplained outbreak, along with 136 of Tasmania's 208 cases.

Victoria has two clusters, with infections forcing at least 100 staff into isolation at Melbourne's Alfred Hospital and 16 cases, previously kept secret, now linked to a private Melbourne inpatient psychiatric facility, including patients, staff and doctors.

Testing rates remain far too low to assess the level of undetected infections. For instance, with a statewide population of 6.3 million, only 104,000 Victorians have been tested. The criteria for testing still exclude people with no overt symptoms or links to known cases.

It is no accident that teachers are being confronted by vehement federal and state government demands to return to classrooms, despite obvious health risks.

Fully supported by the unions, the corporate ruling class is determined to quickly end the current predominance of children being taught at home, so that their parents can be pressured back into offices, factories and retail outlets.

This became more apparent during last night's "Q&A" program on Australian Broadcasting Corporation television. Speaking on behalf of the federal government,

Education Minister Dan Tehan claimed that the official medical advice had been "consistent" throughout the pandemic—that it was safe for schools to remain open.

Deputy Chief Medical Officer Nick Coatsworth and Mark Scott, the head of the NSW education department, backed Tehan. They simply brushed aside that fact that the advice was suddenly reversed last week to now claim that social distancing was not needed in classrooms.

Coatsworth and Scott also stood by a small NSW Health study, prematurely released last weekend, that concluded there was only a slight risk of students transmitting the disease, but they admitted that the study was not peer-reviewed. At the same time, Coatsworth, a medical doctor, insisted that schools and the economy had to be quickly returned to "normal."

However, a question from a Melbourne high school teacher gave voice to the outrage and concern among teachers, other school staff and parents. Karla Owen recalled that Prime Minister Morrison "came out last week and essentially berated and devalued teachers," demanding that they "go to work."

Confronting Tehan, Owen declared: "This was a slap in the face to all teachers. Why is Mr Morrison putting teachers, one of the country's most important resources, in harm's way? Why are we so expendable?"

By speaking out, Owen expressed the underlying resolve of workers to protect lives and livelihoods from the criminal and mercenary "death calculus" of the ruling class. Her passionate objection poses the necessity for the working class to take charge of society and reorganise it on the basis of human life and need, not private profit and death.



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