

Australia's national cabinet pushes return to work despite ongoing COVID-19 dangers

Oscar Grenfell
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A meeting yesterday of the national cabinet, composed of federal, state and territory government leaders, discussed advanced plans to end lockdown measures and force workers back on the job, regardless of the ongoing coronavirus pandemic.

After the gathering, Prime Minister Scott Morrison told the media that the governments were seeking to ensure that a million employees went back into workplaces across the country in coming weeks.

Morrison foreshadowed the imminent removal of restrictions on industries that were closed as a result of their high threat of COVID-19 transmission, including restaurants, cafes and bars. He indicated a complete reopening of the economy by the end of July.

The national cabinet will review all lockdown policies at a meeting on Friday. State and territory governments already have overturned a host of social distancing measures and are pressing ahead with reopening schools.

While touting claims that Australia has “flattened the curve of infections,” Morrison was explicit in acknowledging that lifting restrictions would inevitably spread the coronavirus. He bluntly asserted that it was necessary to start “balancing up” the health crisis with the “cost to the economy.”

The PM made scant mention of the fact that over the past two months nearly 7,000 people have been stricken with the virus and 98 have died. The dangers were underscored this morning with an additional 17 cases announced in Victoria and nine in New South Wales, continuing an upward trend since the weekend.

Over the past several days, authorities have revealed 45 cases linked to a single meatworks in Melbourne, demonstrating the perils for workers of the return to work campaign. The ruling elite's sole aim is to create the conditions for a resumed flow of corporate profits.

In a bid to legitimise Morrison's announcements, Treasurer Josh Frydenberg delivered a speech to the National Press Club earlier in the day, detailing the “cost of the shutdown.”

Citing figures contained in a Treasury report, Frydenberg claimed that economic activity was down \$4 billion every week that the lockdown measures remained in place. He predicted a 10 percent contraction of the economy in the June quarter.

Frydenberg pointed to official figures, which, while dramatically underestimating real unemployment, indicate that nearly one million workers have lost their jobs since mid-March. More than a third have been left jobless in the accommodation and food services industries, and 27 percent have been laid off in recreation and arts. Around 10 percent of those who previously worked in real estate, administration, agriculture and forestry are unemployed.

The government has adopted a series of stimulus packages geared toward underwriting the balance sheets of the largest corporations and the banks. Its \$130 billion “JobKeeper” package, introduced with the support of the Labor Party and the trade unions, is a massive cash handout to big business that does nothing to guarantee the jobs of workers. It has been accompanied by a government-union offensive against wages and conditions.

Now, the governments are seeking to use the social crisis exacerbated by these policies as a battering ram to compel employees to return to their workplaces in unsafe conditions. After reviewing the economic figures, Frydenberg declared: “We must get people back into jobs, and we must get people back at work.”

Morrison outlined a plan for a “COVID Safe economy,” in which most businesses would be reopened, even as the coronavirus continued to

circulate. He reiterated earlier statements that the policy being pursued by governments across the country was “containment and management,” not the effective elimination of the virus, because this would be too costly.

Asked by a reporter whether the reopening of businesses would result in a spike of new infections, Morrison stated: “Of course you will see numbers increase. That is to be expected.”

Morrison emphasised that once the lockdown measures were removed, they would not be restored, regardless of how quickly the virus began to circulate. He said businesses required “certainty,” and this would be undermined if the governments were to “close and then open and then close again.”

Instead, Morrison declared that if outbreaks emerged at workplaces, employees should be sent home, and the facilities should be cleaned and then reopened as soon as possible.

Chillingly, Morrison said the authorities were prepared for outbreaks because of an increase in the number of intensive care unit (ICU) beds and ventilators since the pandemic hit Australia in March. Before the crisis, there were roughly 2,300 beds across the country. Health authorities claim that several hundred more have been created over the past two months.

Morrison’s statement indicates that the governments anticipate hundreds, or possibly thousands, of people becoming critically-ill in coming months. It dovetails with commentary in the financial press, calculating the economic cost of lives saved by lockdown measures and insisting that it is too high when compared with the hit to corporate profits.

Teachers are on the front lines. Frydenberg and Morrison largely dropped their previous posturing that the drive to reopen school classrooms is motivated by concern for children’s education. Frydenberg said schools should resume face-to-face teaching because they are “important enablers for the broader economy,” while Morrison declared that returning children to classrooms would allow parents to return to work.

This agenda is being enforced by state and territory governments, the majority led by the Labor Party. Unsubstantiated claims are being made that there is no danger of coronavirus transmissions in schools. These are contradicted by recent studies in France and

Germany and the eruption last month of a cluster of 94 cases at a school in Auckland, New Zealand.

Labor and the unions have played the central role in ensuring that broad sections of the workforce have remained on the job throughout the crisis. The unions have imperilled the lives and safety of tens of thousands of construction workers, for instance, forcing them to continue working in unsafe conditions, despite widespread anger and opposition.

Morrison acknowledged the efforts of the unions yesterday. He hailed former Australian Council of Trade Unions secretary Greg Combet, who heads a government task force to devise workplace relations rules for the pandemic.

Few details of workplace guidelines have been revealed, but already the national cabinet has declared that social distancing measures are not needed in schools. Government ministers have previously said that distancing requirements do not apply in workplaces.

The de facto political coalition at the national cabinet meeting extended across the Tasman. New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern participated via a video link. Her Labour-led government already has eased lockdown measures to reopen businesses. The meeting discussed plans to resume flights between Australia and New Zealand, in a bid to restore tourism and travel industry profits.



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