

Australian governments pushing workers back on the job amid pandemic

Oscar Grenfell
9 May 2020

Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison yesterday unveiled a plan to force workers back into workplaces and “reopen the economy,” as decided upon earlier in the day by the national cabinet, composed of the federal, state and territory government leaders.

This “roadmap out of the crisis” is a direct response to the demands of the financial elite that lockdown measures to combat the coronavirus pandemic be lifted. Their sole concern is to create the conditions for a resumption of corporate profit-making, despite the dangers this poses to health and lives.

For weeks, business chiefs and the financial press have downplayed the severity of COVID-19, and insisted that social distancing measures are an unacceptable impost on economic activity. Governments, Labor and Liberal-National alike, have asserted that they have “flattened the curve” of infections, despite large coronavirus clusters and ongoing community transmissions.

Morrison bluntly admitted that the policies being pursued by governments would result in coronavirus infections. “There will be outbreaks, there will be more cases, there will be setbacks,” he declared.

Morrison, however, insisted that “we all hold our nerve,” “get out from under the doona,” and “face danger.” These comments underscore the criminal recklessness of the drive to remove the lockdown measures. Workers and young people, concerned about their safety, will be hectorated and bullied into returning to workplaces, schools and universities.

The guidelines adopted by the national cabinet involve three stages of the lifting of restrictions over the next two months.

Under the first stage, retail shops, along with cafes and restaurants, are to immediately begin reopening. This is aimed at boosting revenue in this lucrative sector, despite the high risk of coronavirus transmission associated with those industries.

Home sales and auctions will also resume. This is a response to warnings that the economic crisis could result in major falls in the highly inflated property market.

Over the past two decades, governments and the financial elite have cultivated a massive property bubble. While creating a housing affordability crisis and contributing to the highest levels of household debt in the world, the boom underpins the fortunes of many of the richest individuals, along with the profits of the banks and the major financial institutions.

In the second stage, within weeks, gatherings of up to 20 people will be permitted. This will allow the reopening of cinemas, gyms and amusement parks. Some interstate travel restrictions will be wound back.

The third stage, sometime in July, will involve entire workforces returning to places of employment, and allow gatherings of up to 100 people. Venues that could trigger mass outbreaks, such as nightclubs, saunas and food courts, will resume their operations, while domestic travel will recommence.

The government graphics promoting the plan crudely express the big business interests underlying these decisions, providing estimates of the supposed economic benefits. Each stage, it is claimed, will result in an additional \$3 billion or more in economic activity per month.

The graphics assert that social distancing, including a space of 1.5 metres between individuals, will be maintained throughout the three stages. This is patently impossible, especially in the third stage where employees will be driven into often-overcrowded workplaces and public transport.

Already, the national cabinet has declared that social distancing is unnecessary in schools. And the governments, employers and trade unions have forced tens of thousands of workers in factories and on building sites to continue production throughout the crisis, working

in close contact with each other.

Mass unemployment, especially among young workers and students, is being used as a battering ram to push financially devastated workers back into workplaces, regardless of their safety fears. Many also will be forced to accept lower pay and worse conditions under deals struck by the unions with major retail, hospitality and clerical employer groups.

The national cabinet measures are premised on “managing” and “containing” the continued spread of the virus. This includes a “COVIDSafe” mobile phone application, supposedly designed to assist in tracing infections. Technology experts have questioned whether the app will assist in any way, because of multiple design flaws and the inherent limitations of automated technologies.

The financial press has welcomed the national cabinet announcement, while insisting that political leaders press ahead with the reopening whatever the consequences.

The *Australian's* editor-at-large this morning summed up the sentiment in ruling circles, hailing Morrison's comments as “the first tentative steps towards a form of COVID ‘normalisation’.” Paul Kelly concluded: “The public's mood will shift—maybe fast, maybe slow—from a premium on beating the virus to a premium on restoration of economic and social life.”

In other words, working people must accept an unending threat of infection, serious illness and even death, because measures aimed at effectively eliminating the virus would be too costly.

Scientists are warning of a new, mutant strain of COVID-19, which appears to be more contagious than the initial iteration of the virus.

The Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO) has found that the D614G mutation, which has been prevalent in the countries hardest hit by the pandemic, accounts for two-thirds of confirmed cases in Victoria and Western Australia, and one-third in other states.

The dangers of rapid outbreaks have been underscored by the growth of a cluster that originated in a Melbourne meat works three weeks ago. It currently accounts for 72 cases, with the number rising by 9 yesterday and 13 the day before.

Despite this, Kelly and other business commentators have insisted that state premiers, who will oversee the national cabinet plan, must not delay. Victorian Labor Premier Daniel Andrews has been criticised for supposedly not moving rapidly enough to reopen the

state's schools and businesses.

In reality, the Victorian government has flagged that it will consider resuming face-to-face classroom teaching, despite studies in France and Germany warning that schools can be centres of widespread infection.

Other governments have gone further, with the Northern Territory Labor government lifting restrictions on some outdoor gatherings last week and the South Australian Liberal government signalling that it may reopen most businesses by the end of the month.

The state and territory leaders have been in the forefront of the back-to-work campaign as part of a de facto government of national unity. The demands being placed on them for faster action are aimed at intimidating ordinary people.

There is widespread concern over the reopening. A survey conducted this week by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation and Vox Pop Labs found that some 60 percent of respondents would not be comfortable going to a bar or restaurant after restrictions are lifted, while more than 40 percent said they thought the crisis would continue for another 12 months or longer.

The financial elite is anxious to press ahead with a sweeping onslaught on working conditions and wages. State and federal governments have already provided the largest corporations with more than \$320 billion in bailouts, while doing virtually nothing for the one million people thrown out of work during April alone.

For decades, the trade unions have assisted employers to tear up the conditions of millions of workers, slash overtime pay, and expand casual and contract labour. This offensive is now being taken to a new level, with the ruling elite seeking to reduce the conditions of workers to those of the Great Depression in the 1930s.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact