

Australian governments rush to end lockdowns in line with business demands

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Australia's federal, state and territory governments are rapidly overturning lockdown measures introduced for the coronavirus pandemic. This is in line with the demands of big business for a "reopening of the economy" aimed at ensuring corporate profit-making activities and stepped-up exploitation of the working class.

Hundreds of thousands of students and teachers are returning to schools, crowded public transport services are operating and millions of workers are being herded back onto the job. In a number of states and territories, large gatherings, which pose a particular risk of mass COVID-19 infections, will resume over coming days.

The campaign is accelerating despite ongoing community transmission of the coronavirus, especially in New South Wales (NSW) and Victoria. These are the two most populous states and also have had the highest number of confirmed COVID-19 cases and fatalities. Nationally, 7,116 cases and 102 deaths have been reported officially since the crisis began in March. These official figures, which likely understate the true rates, indicate that there are still more than 500 active infections.

The federal Liberal-National Coalition government and state and territory leaders have openly acknowledged that the reopening will result in increased infections, meaning that growing numbers could become seriously-ill and possibly die.

Yesterday, federal health minister Greg Hunt stated that once restrictions were overturned, they were "unlikely" to be reinstated, regardless of the progress of the health crisis. Instead, he declared, authorities would seek to impose "localised rings of containment" in response to "suburban, facility-based, or regional outbreak[s]."

Hunt said the reimposition of lockdowns would be considered only after "systemic, statewide" transmission, i.e., after tens or hundreds of thousands had been exposed to the virus. Governments have previously flagged the

possibility of military-enforced shutdowns of suburbs and neighbourhoods where large numbers of infections occur.

In an indication of the immense dangers, Hunt referenced last month's mass outbreak in northwest Tasmania as an example of the "containment" strategy. More than 100 people were infected within days, before 1,000 health workers were placed in isolation and two hospitals were closed in an operation involving military personnel.

Demands for the full resumption of face-to-face teaching in the schools have spearheaded the back-to-work campaign. Government ministers, Labor and Liberal alike, have acknowledged that the return of classroom teaching is aimed at creating the conditions for parents to go back into their places of employment.

Public schools were fully reopened yesterday by the state Liberal government in NSW and the Labor administration in Queensland. NSW Premier Gladys Berejiklian dispensed with a previous plan for a "staged return" without even a pretence of consultation with teachers or parents.

Labor governments in the Northern Territory and Western Australia had already overseen the resumption of most classes. In Victoria, Labor Premier Daniel Andrews ordered a return to classrooms of years 1, 2, 11 and 12 from today, to be followed by the remaining students on June 9.

The risks were underscored this morning, when parents at Sydney's Waverley College received a text message instructing them to immediately pick their children up from school after a year seven student had tested positive and the campus had been "evacuated." Then, this afternoon, a primary school student at nearby Moriah College was also confirmed as having the virus, prompting that school to shut. Last week, a private school student also tested positive.

The cases further expose the claims of the authorities

that students are unlikely to contract and transmit COVID-19. These politically-motivated assertions have relied on cherry-picked “evidence,” which has not been peer-reviewed.

They have ignored studies in France and Germany, indicating that school pupils are as likely to be inflicted with the virus as any other cohort, and have made virtually no reference to the emergence internationally of a new illness among school-aged children linked to COVID-19, with symptoms similar to Kawasaki Disease.

The hasty return to the schools has provoked widespread opposition. Last week, Ash Parmar, a worker in the Sydney suburb of Toongabbie, initiated an online petition, demanding that parents be permitted to decide whether or not to send their children to school. In the space of several days, it has received over 8,000 signatures.

Speaking to the *Sydney Morning Herald*, Parmar branded the reopening as a “bullying act to get everybody in,” adding: “Just to open up schools for political mileage or different pressures other than health, I don’t think that I want to make my kids guinea pigs to that kind of behaviour from the government.”

Teachers have taken to social media denouncing the endangerment of their health and safety, pointing to the impossibility of social distancing in schools and exposing the failure of the authorities to provide them with protective and hygiene equipment. Many have condemned the education trade unions, which have either actively promoted the resumption of face-to-face teaching or prevented any struggle against it.

Governments have claimed that schools and workplaces where infections occur will receive “deep cleaning.” Experts, however, have described the concept as “totally made up.” A recent national survey of cleaners by the United Workers Union found that nine in ten were compelled to rush essential jobs, while eight in ten lacked adequate equipment, including appropriate disinfectant.

One anonymous cleaner who works at schools in Melbourne told the *New Daily*: “We don’t have enough equipment like proper cloths, and dusters, things like that... We don’t have enough to make sure it’s safe.” The cleaner said they often ran out of disinfectant and had been provided with only “one box of gloves to share between four cleaners” and “the supervisor said to try to wear only one glove.”

The comments highlight the dangers facing the millions of workers who will be compelled to return to their places of employment over the coming weeks. Already,

hundreds of thousands of workers in manufacturing and construction have been forced by the trade unions and employers to remain on the job throughout the pandemic.

The risks will be compounded by the reopening of bars and restaurants. From June 1, a raft of restrictions will be lifted on the hospitality sector, along with competitive sports and other large gatherings. In South Australia, for instance, pubs, gyms, cinemas, places of worship, beauty salons and other sites will be allowed to accommodate 80 people at any given time, rendering contact tracing almost impossible if infections occur.

The back-to-work campaign shows that the same criminal indifference to the plight of ordinary people, demonstrated throughout the pandemic in the US and internationally, dominates in the Australian ruling elite and the political establishment that represents it.

As in every other country, the crisis response by Australian governments has been aimed solely at ensuring the fortunes of the corporate and financial elite. Hundreds of billions of dollars have been handed to the largest businesses, while only a pittance of official relief has been provided to the millions of workers who have been thrown out of their jobs or whose earnings have been slashed, since March.

Today, Prime Minister Scott Morrison delivered an address to the National Press Club, outlining the economic “road out of the crisis.” He signalled sweeping cuts to public spending and a further pro-business overhaul of industrial relations, to be enforced by the unions. This is aimed at returning workers to conditions not seen since the Great Depression of the 1930s.



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