

Oppose the premature lifting of COVID-19 safety restrictions!

The Socialist Equality Party (Australia)
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With complete disregard for the dangers of a new wave of infection, governments are lifting COVID-19 safety restrictions at breakneck speed in Australia, as they are around the world, despite the still worsening global pandemic.

Internationally, the pandemic is spreading and the toll is rising rapidly. So far, some 213 countries and territories have reported more than 6.3 million confirmed coronavirus cases and nearly 380,000 deaths. Shocking scenes of overrun hospitals have spread from the US, UK, Italy and Spain to Brazil, Russia, India, Peru, Chile and Mexico.

This is not simply a natural disaster. COVID-19 has triggered an historic failure of the capitalist profit system. Every aspect of the response of governments—their cuts to public healthcare and medical research, lack of pandemic preparation and indifference to the lives of working people—flows from the subordination of human needs to corporate profits and the accumulation of personal wealth.

In Australia, at the behest of big business, workers are being pushed back into unsafe workplaces, including schools, like their fellow workers internationally, even as fresh outbreaks keep appearing across the country, from schools and abattoirs to McDonalds outlets and aged care facilities.

Via decrees agreed by the so-called national cabinet, Liberal-National and Labor governments alike are gambling with the lives of the population. They are announcing accelerated “reopening” measures almost daily. In their haste, they are sweeping aside previous timetables, long before the impact of the earlier lifting of restrictions has been revealed.

Government leaders like Prime Minister Scott Morrison openly declare that new infections are unavoidable. The complicit corporate media declares that “living with COVID” is “the new normal,” dismissing the danger of explosive spreads of the highly infectious and deadly disease.

This is a dangerous leap in the dark. Studies conducted internationally have concluded that up to half of COVID-19 infections result from pre-symptomatic or asymptomatic transmissions—that is, from people who have no idea they are carrying the coronavirus. Yet no general testing had been done in Australia, nor is any proposed.

That is because, based solely on the financial impact on business of retaining restrictions, Morrison and his fellow government leaders have flatly ruled out seeking to eradicate the coronavirus—the only sure way to halt the deaths and disease until the development of a vaccine.

This official response is in line with the “death calculus” advocated in the financial newspapers in Australia, as well as around the globe. As far as the ruling capitalist class is concerned, working class deaths and ill-health are a price to be paid, if need be, in order to restore private profits and boost the share markets. The cost of saving lives is too high, according to this calculus, even as billions of dollars are spent on one corporate bailout package after another.

For all the endless government and media propaganda that Australia has beaten the pandemic, deep medical and public concerns remain. There is a bipartisan government rush to lift the restrictions that may have saved

people, so far, from the terrible losses being suffered across Europe, the US, the Indian sub-continent and Latin America.

Australian governments had the distinct advantage of being forewarned by the calamities in China and Italy, as well as the World Health Organisation’s declaration of a Public Health Emergency of International Concern on January 30. By early March, infections were growing exponentially in Australia. Nevertheless, the “national cabinet” resisted taking serious lockdown measures, such as the closures of pubs and clubs, until the third week of March, and even then tried to keep schools open, defying the concerns of teachers and parents. Most factories, warehouses and mining and construction sites were kept operating, despite workers’ protests.

A peer-reviewed data analytics study from the University of Sydney, published on May 18, found a further one-week delay in government action could have led to a five-fold increase in the total number of people infected. That would mean more than 35,000 cases today, not the current total of almost 7,200. Yet, these are the very measures now being reversed at a blinding pace.

Already, largely as a result of such disregard for working class lives, 103 people have died in Australia. Many of those resulted directly from profit-driven government responses, including the docking in Sydney of the infection-riddled Ruby Princess cruise ship on March 19 and the disembarkation of passengers without screening or quarantining.

How quickly outbreaks can erupt has been seen in the more than 100 infections belatedly reported at Cedar Meats in Melbourne and the quarantining of an entire grade two class and a teacher at the Holy Eucharist Primary School in St Albans, Melbourne, linked to a cluster at nearby Keilor Downs College.

Moreover, the coronavirus knows no national boundaries. Australia is an island, but it cannot be walled off from global trade and movements of people. The recent arrival in Fremantle of 20 infected crew members on a sheep export ship, like the earlier docking of the Ruby Princess, shows that the growth of infections in other parts of the world is bound to hit the Australian population as well.

Other countries earlier hailed as pandemic success stories, such as Japan, South Korea and Singapore, have been compelled by second wave outbreaks to reinstate shutdown measures. Yet Australia’s governments have declared that once restrictions are lifted, they are unlikely to be reimposed.

Everywhere the drive is now the same, regardless of the level of deaths and infections, from Donald Trump and Boris Johnson to Morrison: workers must go back on the job physically for the sake of the “economy.” This “economy” is that of the financial and corporate elite, whose wealth has soared further on the stock markets, while workers face job destruction, unsafe conditions and stepped-up exploitation.

The pandemic has intensified social inequality and the concentration of wealth in the hands of the super-rich. Alongside unemployment and under-employment totalling 20 percent of the workforce, the combined fortunes

controlled by the richest 20 people are sky-rocketing. The *Australian Financial Review* reported last Friday that the “Top 20” had enjoyed a cumulative increase in wealth over the past year from \$143 billion to \$189 billion, a 32 percent jump.

Great Depression levels of job destruction are causing widespread destitution and social stress. Those worst affected are the young and the most poorly-paid workers. According to a Grattan Institute report, about 40 percent of low-paid workers—those on less than \$150 a week—were likely to be thrown out of work, more than twice the rate for people on over \$3,000 per week.

This financial pressure is being used to coerce workers back into schools, offices and other workplaces. Those who refuse to do so will soon be cut off meagre JobKeeper and JobSeeker payments. The ruling class demands that workers must be fully back at work in order to extract the surplus value needed to pay for the corporate bailouts, totalling some \$270 billion, and the mountain of public debt, estimated at \$1 trillion, used to prop up Australian capitalism.

The role of Labor and the unions

None of this would be possible except for the role of the Labor Party and the trade unions. From the outset of the pandemic, they formed and supported a de facto coalition regime. An unprecedented “national cabinet” of Labor and Liberal-National federal, state and territory leaders is ruling the country, behind closed doors, with the full backing of the unions.

Australia is a striking case of an unstable and widely discredited government—that of Morrison—being propped up, out of fear of social unrest.

Not only are workers being pushed into potentially deadly facilities, they are confronted by further cuts to jobs, wages and conditions as the governments and employers, working hand-in-glove with the unions, exploit the pandemic to “restructure” their operations and workplace relations.

Led by the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU), behind the backs of workers, the unions have imposed national agreements with employers to slash the pay and conditions of millions of workers in fast food outlets, cafes and restaurants, hospitality industries and clerical work. As ACTU secretary Sally McManus pledged, the unions have given employers “everything you want.”

Now the unions have joined hands with Morrison’s Liberal-National government and big business in a tripartite process of industrial relations “reform.” This is a drive to go even further in attacking working class conditions, intensifying the assault the unions mounted in the Accords with the Hawke and Keating Labor governments in the 1980s and 1990s. Wage freezes and penalty rate cuts are being demanded already.

Together with Morrison, the unions are appealing to workers to “lay down their weapons.” They fear the underlying opposition of workers, including the construction workers kept on unsafe sites, and the teachers and parents whose children are being railroaded back into classrooms and onto public transport without any physical distancing protections.

As in the US, the corporate media and political establishment is also seeking to divert the rising unrest, and deflect from its own culpability, by trying to falsely blame China for the pandemic, even though the Chinese authorities alerted the world in January. In doing so, the Morrison government, again with Labor’s backing, has placed the Australian population on the front lines of the Trump administration’s incendiary economic and military offensive against China, a perceived threat to US global hegemony.

Thus, workers in Australia not only face a domestic war by the ruling class against their social and working conditions, endangering their lives; they are being dragged into a potential nuclear war.

The necessity for rank-and-file committees

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) opposes the dangerous “back-to-work” campaign. In the face of the dictates of the financial oligarchs and their political and industrial servants, the working class must assert its own interests, for the protection of lives and livelihoods.

Against the thoroughly pro-corporate trade unions, genuine working-class organisations must be built to prevent infection, sickness and death, and organise to combat the corporate-union offensive on jobs and conditions.

Workers need to form rank-and-file action committees in every school, factory, office, university and workplace independent of the unions. These committees, democratically controlled by workers themselves—together with students and parents where appropriate—should formulate, oversee and enforce safety and workplace standards. Where conditions are violated, there must be a stoppage of work. The tasks of these committees would include:

1. Organising an industrial and political fightback against the government-corporate-union offensive on jobs, wages and conditions. All pay cuts, elimination of penalty rates, job losses and cuts to working conditions must be opposed.

2. Demanding secure employment for all workers, ending casualisation and the “gig economy” to which so many workers, especially youth, visa holders and students, have been subjected.

3. Controlling working hours, workloads and production speeds to ensure safe conditions. This must allow for sufficient rest, health care monitoring and regular deep cleaning.

4. Guaranteeing physical distancing, the highest-quality personal protective equipment and other essential safety measures. This includes regular testing for all workers and adequate training in the necessary equipment and procedures.

5. Reporting full and timely information about all infections, to prevent management and government cover-ups, and ensure rapid shutdowns and thorough cleaning before restarts.

6. Demanding sick leave and guaranteed income for all infected and affected workers. Any worker who tests positive or comes into contact with an infected worker must be isolated and provided immediate medical treatment. If anyone’s family members report symptoms, the worker should be tested and isolated until cleared by a medical professional—with no loss of pay.

7. Ensuring protection from victimisation for workers calling attention to unsafe working conditions or refusing to work. Any worker who has been fired for speaking out against unsafe conditions must be rehired with full back pay.

To answer the cry there is no money for these measures, the bailout packages handed to corporations, banks and big business should be returned and used to finance them, for the protection of the population.

This fight means organising the resistance of workers internationally. In every country, there are growing numbers of strikes and job actions by health, meat, transit, auto and other workers demanding safe conditions.

The fight against the pandemic necessarily involves a struggle of workers against the ruling class and its dictatorship over economic and political life. It is, therefore, a fight against capitalism and for socialism, the restructuring of society on the basis of social need, not private profit.

The pandemic is a world problem and can be fought only through the

international collaboration and unification of workers and all those committed to defending human life. This means rejecting all efforts to divide workers along racial, ethnic and national lines—in particular, the war-mongering anti-China campaign.

Increasingly, over coming months, the attacks of the ruling class will produce enormous social opposition and resistance. But to provide the necessary alternative political perspective and leadership, a socialist party must be built in the working class—that is the Socialist Equality Party.

The SEP is the Australian section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, which publishes the *World Socialist Web Site*. We will provide all the assistance we can to workers who want to establish rank-and-file committees. We urge all our readers to study our program and make the decision to join the SEP.



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