Australian military deployed in Melbourne as COVID-19 infection rate surges

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The Victorian Labor government of Daniel Andrews this afternoon announced 30 new coronavirus case in the state over the past 24 hours, amid an ongoing spike in infections. Yesterday's tally of 33 confirmed COVID-19 cases was the highest in a single day since April 3.

In the last week, 155 new cases were discovered, more than in any seven-day period since April 10. A man in his 80s died on Tuesday night, the state's twentieth coronavirus death, and the first in the country since May 23.

Confronted with the mounting public health crisis, which Andrews likened to the summer's catastrophic bushfires, the Victorian Labor government has sought assistance from the military.

Around 200 Australian Defence Force (ADF) personnel have been sent to Melbourne to assist with door-to-door COVID-19 testing.

While Andrews announced Thursday morning that 1,000 ADF troops would be deployed, mainly to take control of Melbourne's quarantine hotels, by the evening the plan had changed. The Victorian government is now in discussions to hand management of the hotels over to the state police, with the defence contingent limited to a couple of hundred.

The involvement of the military and police illustrates the critical lack of public funding in the civilian arena.

The health emergency demands the deployment of highly-trained doctors, nurses, epidemiologists and infectious disease specialists, equipped with the best available PPE and medical equipment.

This "army" does not exist, however. Decades of cuts to public health spending have rendered hospitals across the country barely able to cope with patient demand under normal circumstances.

The increasing cost of tertiary education, poor wages and working conditions of health workers, and Australia's ageing population have led to a chronic shortage of available staff, particularly nurses.

The shock of the pandemic has done nothing to change this. While elective surgeries were temporarily cancelled early on to free up beds for COVID-19 patients, no moves were made to retrain health workers in infectious disease control and management. Instead, thousands of nurses and other hospital workers across the country were stood down or forced to take leave.

The deployment of the military in the domestic environment is part of a broader authoritarian response to the pandemic and the mounting social crisis it has exposed. It is a stark warning of the preparations by governments to repress growing social and political opposition, above all from the working class.

It is unclear why the Andrews government scaled down the military involvement at the last minute. It may have been for legal reasons, or because of official fears that the sight of a thousand troops on the streets of Melbourne would have been viewed as a major attack on democratic rights by ordinary people.

Nevertheless, Victorian police have again been given the power to issue on-the-spot fines for infractions of social-distancing and public-gathering restrictions.

Since the onset of the pandemic, Victorian police have handed down 6,200 coronavirus-related fines, more than all other states and territories combined. The fines, worth a total of more than $10 million, have disproportionately been issued in low socio-economic and high-immigrant areas.

This aggressive policing is designed to give the impression that authorities are seriously fighting to stop the spread of the coronavirus. The reality is that this is only true insofar as it does not affect the profit interests of big business.

While small gatherings of people in outdoor areas have been hit with fines, workers and schoolchildren have been forced to spend their days in close quarters with hundreds of their colleagues.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* has warned, the relaxation of social-distancing restrictions and the drive to reopen schools and workplaces has led to a dramatic resurgence of new COVID-19 cases.

While planned relaxations to social-distancing restrictions in Victoria were postponed due to the spate of cases, the only measure taken to reduce the evident increase in community transmission was to restrict gatherings in private homes.

This is part of a broader strategy to blame individual workers and their families for outbreaks and to ensure that the wheels of industry are able to get back to generating profits for the corporate elite.

The Murdoch press has enthusiastically reported allegations that one of the clusters is related to an extended family Eid al-Fitr celebration held days before state regulations were relaxed to allow such gatherings.

This is a clear attempt to divide the working class and foster anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim sentiment as a distraction from the dangerous conditions created by the premature reopening of workplaces and schools in Victoria and around the country.

In a further effort to attribute the surge in cases to personal irresponsibility, Andrews said yesterday: "If you're sick, you cannot go to work… That is both dangerous and wrong."

The reality is, if authorities were serious about this, they would institute paid pandemic leave for all workers who are unwell or need to self-isolate after contact with a confirmed case.

In any event, there is no evidence to suggest that the recent increase in confirmed cases is substantially a result of people working while symptomatic.

Andrews revealed yesterday morning that the ten worst-affected suburbs are: Keilor Downs, Broadmeadows, Maidstone, Albanvale, Sunshine West, Hallam, Brunswick West, Fawkner, Reservoir and Pakenham.

The premier announced that a team of health workers will begin travelling door-to-door to offer free COVID-19 testing to everyone in these suburbs, with the aim of testing around 50 percent of residents—or 100,000 people—over the next ten days.

This, Australia's first effort to initiate mass testing of people with no symptoms or known exposure, comes 116 days after the first COVID-19 death in the country.

The "blitz" is likely to result in reduced testing elsewhere in Victoria, as the state only has the capacity to test 20,000 samples per day. While other states have agreed to share laboratory resources, it is unlikely that this will meet the increased demand.

More than 20,000 Victorians presented for COVID-19 tests on Tuesday and Wednesday, with many waiting three to four hours or being turned away.

The lack of broad-scale testing elsewhere in the country is in line with the policy of state and governments, which is not to eradicate the virus, because that would be too costly, but to supposedly contain it. Limited testing serves to artificially lower the reported rate of infection in order to justify the ending of lockdown measures.

The rapid increase of cases in Victoria in recent weeks is a sharp warning of what a dangerous policy this is.

The spike has underscored the way in which it is above all the working class that is being forced to pay for the crisis. Around 100 Centrelink contractors who live in the Melbourne hotspots were stood down without pay on Tuesday following a directive from Services Australia, the government agency in charge of the welfare provider.

While other state leaders have responded to the upsurge with increased border patrols and stern admonitions to avoid travel to the affected areas, the reality is that nowhere near enough testing has been carried out to declare any state or territory free of the coronavirus.

New South Wales (NSW) has also seen an increase in recent weeks. A Sydney school was closed yesterday after a seven-year-old student tested positive for COVID-19, followed by another school today.

The Victorian surge has not deterred NSW authorities from their plan to allow crowds of up to 10,000 people to attending sporting events from July 1, although the state's health minister, Brad Hazzard, said yesterday that Melbourne residents will be prevented from buying tickets.

In the last two weeks, 19 Victorian schools, pre-schools and childcare facilities have been forced to close after children or staff tested positive. Despite this, health authorities continue to insist that schools are safe.

Twenty-four of the week's cases are returned travellers in quarantine hotels, two of which are linked to large outbreaks in Melbourne. Workers at Stamford Plaza and Rydges on Swanston and their close contacts account for at least 30 recent confirmed cases.

One security contractor employed at Rydges on Swanston told the *Age* that the Victorian Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) told guards to wear masks for four hours at a time and use no more than six pairs of gloves each day.

A spokeswoman for the DHHS said that the provision of safe workplaces was the responsibility of the hotels and private security contractors.

Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison has downplayed the Victorian spike throughout the week. He has insisted that states should continue to lift restrictions.

The federal government and its state counterparts have declared that regardless of how many infections occur, lockdown measures will not be reinstated. Morrison told the media yesterday: "We can't go, stop, go, stop, go. We can't flick the light on and off."

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