

Australian COVID-19 surge continues in Victoria

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Health authorities in the state of Victoria announced 64 new COVID-19 cases today, following 75 on Monday, which was the fourth-highest single day figure since the beginning of the pandemic, and the highest since March 31.

In the past week the state has recorded almost 300 new cases, more than in any week since April 6.

Addressing the media this afternoon, Labor Premier Daniel Andrews announced the reimposition of limited lockdown measures in the worst affected areas, covering ten postcodes. Their overwhelmingly working-class residents are being instructed not to travel around the city, and to limit their movements to essential activities, including work, study, shopping and exercise. Some businesses, deemed “non-essential,” will again be directed to close.

The measures were only introduced after more than seven days of rapidly rising case numbers. They stop short of the “ring-fencing” lockdowns of areas with high numbers of COVID-19 cases that had been advocated by some epidemiologists.

The announcement is a partial reversion to the limited lockdowns that were introduced in March and that have been eased over the past month. Under such regulations, most businesses, including large factories, are permitted to continue their operations, posing the danger of further transmission.

Andrew’s announcement came after Victorian Chief Health Officer Brett Sutton indicated yesterday that the number of infected people is likely still growing. He said: “I think it will get worse before it gets better.”

Health authorities have suggested that the increase in confirmed cases is the result of a testing “blitz” in two of the Melbourne suburbs identified as “hotspots” but the number of tests carried out over the weekend was lower than on most days last week.

Only 15,381 tests were carried out on Sunday, and 17,954 on Saturday, down from 22,103 on Friday.

In almost four months since testing began, only around 800,000 tests have been conducted in Victoria, which has a population of more than 6 million.

The authorities have begun using a newly-developed saliva test in addition to the standard throat swab. However, this will not increase the daily testing capacity beyond the current figure of around 20,000 because it requires the same laboratory processing as the existing tests. The saliva test misses about 13 percent of COVID-19 cases detected by the already imperfect throat and nose swab test.

Significantly, almost all the new cases have been contracted locally. Previously, returned travellers accounted for most positive tests, and outbreaks among staff at two quarantine hotels. These hotels have been largely under the control of hotel staff, cleaners and private security workers, with no specialised training in infection control.

While some additional health care workers have been sent to the hotels, the newly-announced engagement of prison officers as security guards at the facilities points to the state government trying to impose a law-and-order solution on a public health crisis.

This follows the reintroduction of on-the-spot fines for social-distancing breaches and the deployment of military personnel to Melbourne’s mass testing sites.

The source of infection in more than 200 new cases has not been determined, suggesting that community transmission is much more widespread, at least in sections of Melbourne, than previously reported.

The state Labor government continues to blame family gatherings for the surge in coronavirus cases. Until today, the only reversal in the relaxation of Victoria’s “lockdown” measures had been to limit the

size of private indoor gatherings.

But this has nothing to do with an objective assessment of the surge in cases, which is entirely bound up with the profit interests of business.

The Australian ruling class has never seriously entertained the possibility of stamping out the virus. The forced return to workplaces and school classrooms was carried out across the country with full knowledge that it would lead to an increase in COVID-19 cases.

Victorian Health Minister Jenny Mikakos confirmed this yesterday. “The agreed national strategy of the national cabinet was a ‘suppression’ strategy,” she said. “We did anticipate that we would get new cases and outbreaks.”

While Victorian children are now on school holidays, Mikakos yesterday announced that six Melbourne schools were linked to new coronavirus cases, meaning they would need to be “deep cleaned” and close contacts would have to self-isolate.

Since yesterday, four more schools have reported coronavirus cases. Two staff members at Camberwell Grammar School, two students at Hume Central Secondary College, and one student each at Moreland Primary School and Parkwood Green Primary School have tested positive. Contact tracing is underway.

Two other schools were linked to cases over the weekend, following three school closures last week. In the past three weeks, more than 30 schools and childcare facilities have had to close temporarily following positive tests of children or staff.

Working class areas are the worst affected. Three staff members at Albanvale Primary School have been diagnosed with COVID-19, and the outbreak is linked to at least two other cases.

More than a third of recent cases are among young people in their 20s and 30s, which Mikakos characterised as the result of “more young people getting together with their mates contracting the virus.”

In reality, workers in this age group are among the hardest hit by the mass unemployment sparked by the pandemic. Many of those who have kept their jobs are employed in industries where they have been forced to work at high risk of contracting COVID-19.

The desperation of young people is illustrated by a 40 percent year-on-year increase in applications to join the Defence Force in April.

It is completely disingenuous for governments that

have consistently downplayed the severity of the coronavirus in Australia, especially for younger people, to now claim that these young people are responsible for the surge, and not the reckless profit-driven policies.

Despite blaming families and young people, the Victorian government has been forced to report several more workplace outbreaks.

Five workers at the Coles Chilled Distribution centre at Laverton, in Melbourne’s west, have tested positive, including some who had no known contact outside of work.

The North Melbourne cluster of 22 confirmed cases appears to have started with at least two staff members from fashion clothing retailer H&M in Northland before spreading among family and social contacts.

At least six recent cases have been linked to health care facilities—three at Hampstead Dental in Maidstone, and one each at Royal Melbourne Hospital, The Melbourne Clinic, and the Red Cross Lifeblood processing centre. A paramedic was also among yesterday’s positive tests.

While Victoria is home to the majority of Australia’s recent COVID-19 cases, it would be reckless to assume that other states and territories are immune from a similar resurgence.

The easing of social-distancing measures and the opening up of schools and workplaces are continuing throughout the country, despite the well-understood risks.

Mass testing of asymptomatic people has not been carried out anywhere in the country, meaning health authorities have no idea how widespread the virus is.



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