

# Australian state government locks down Melbourne working class suburbs

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1 July 2020

Victorian Labor Premier Daniel Andrews yesterday announced a lockdown covering 36 suburbs in the west and north of Melbourne, the state capital and second largest city in Australia.

The measures are a response to a sharp spike in coronavirus cases over the past fortnight. In the seven days to Monday, Victoria recorded almost 300 new infections, the greatest weekly increase since early April. Monday's tally of 75 cases was among the four highest in the state since the pandemic began. It was followed by 64 confirmed infections yesterday.

Another 73 cases were announced this morning, the second largest daily total since the recent surge began. Of those, nine were related to known clusters, 19 were detected through routine testing and 42 are still under investigation, with the source of infection unknown. Only three of the cases were among returned travellers in hotel quarantine, so the infections are overwhelmingly the result of community transmission.

Today's cases mark the 15th straight day of double-digit increases in Victoria. The surge is a direct result of the ending of safety restrictions over the past month by state and federal governments, Labor and Liberal-National alike. Despite the worsening global pandemic, they had asserted that the crisis was all but over, and that the decisive issue was reopening the economy, which is the demand of the corporate elite.

This program has been carried out at breakneck speed, regardless of ongoing community transmission of the virus in Victoria and New South Wales, the country's two most populous states. Prime Minister Scott Morrison and the state premiers had admitted that their policies would result in increased infections, but claimed they could be managed and locally contained.

In line with this agenda, Andrews resisted calls for the re-imposition of a lockdown for days. Only when it

became clear that infections threatened to spiral out of control, did he make yesterday's announcement.

The new measures apply to ten postcodes in Melbourne's western and northern suburbs, which have seen the highest rates of infection. The areas are overwhelmingly working class and densely-populated, with large migrant cohorts and high levels of poverty and unemployment. They include suburbs such as Broadmeadows, which has been decimated by the closure of the car industry.

The hundreds of thousands of residents in the 36 suburbs have been directed to only leave their homes for work, study, medical care, exercise and essential shopping. All visits to other people's homes within the affected areas, including by close relatives, have been banned.

Some businesses that recently resumed operations as part of the reopening will be ordered to shut. This includes gyms and beauty salons. Restaurants and cafes will again be restricted to serving take away.

Factories, warehouses, schools and other large worksites that pose a high risk of widespread transmission, however, will be permitted to continue their operations. This is in keeping with the entire pro-business response of governments to the pandemic. Throughout the crisis, most industry, along with construction, has not closed or reduced operations, despite the impossibility of social distancing in factories and on building sites.

Andrews declared that the new restrictions were needed because COVID-19 is "wildly infectious." While lockdown measures are necessary, their localised character means that people in the affected areas will be subjected to different regulations than the rest of the population. Residents of Melbourne's affluent and upper middle-class suburbs will be unaffected.

Andrews spelt out a punitive agenda of police checks, fines of up to \$1,652 and possible arrest for those accused of violating the restrictions. “Victoria Police will not be mucking about,” Andrews declared.

Mobile police units will conduct “border checks” around the affected suburbs, to determine whether people travelling in and out are doing so for “essential” reasons.

This dovetails with a broader build-up of police powers, which is escalating amid ruling class fears over mounting opposition to social inequality, poverty and unemployment on a scale not seen since the 1930s Great Depression.

Labor’s response also aims to bolster the claims of state and federal governments and the corporate media, that the Victorian spike is the result of irresponsible individuals, rather than the “back-to-work” program of the entire ruling elite.

Since the surge began, Andrews and Victorian officials have vaguely asserted that the increasing numbers of cases are the result of violations of restrictions, including large family gatherings. Yesterday, he claimed that 928 residents in Broadmeadows and Keilor Downs had refused to be tested during the current “blitz” in areas with high rates of infection.

Andrews provided no proof or additional information. As recently as a week ago, residents in suburbs hit by the surge reported difficulties in accessing tests, including lengthy queues, waiting times of several hours and attempts to prevent those without symptoms from being examined.

The reactionary character of the campaign to blame the population was spelt out by Peta Credlin, a Sky News commentator and former advisor to Prime Minister Tony Abbott. Credlin stated last Friday that the surge was largely the result of South Sudanese residents attending large gatherings for Ramadan. Melbourne’s African community has long been the target of a xenophobic witch-hunt by the media and political establishment.

Only when it was pointed out that over 90 percent of South Sudanese in Melbourne are Christian, and therefore would not be celebrating a Muslim religious holiday, did Sky News retract the claim and apologise.

In reality, the rising infections are a result of government policies. Yesterday it was revealed that a

government-commissioned report, using DNA tracing, had determined that many of the new cases could be linked to security guards at hotels where returned travellers are quarantining.

After decades of privatisation and cuts to the public healthcare system, the task of overseeing hotel quarantines has largely been outsourced to private security companies. Their lowly-paid employees reportedly have virtually no health training, let alone the expertise required to deal with a highly-infectious virus.

Fifteen Melbourne schools have been forced to shut over the past three days after infections were detected. Some 29 schools in Victoria have reported confirmed coronavirus cases in the space of less than a month. This is a consequence of the resumption of full face-to-face teaching in all states, which began in June.

Despite the spread in schools, the Victorian government and its counterparts in other states have insisted that classroom teaching will continue. This is because in-person teaching is central to getting parents back into their places of employment, to create the conditions for a resumption of corporate profit-making.

Meanwhile, governments are continuing to rapidly lift remaining restrictions. From today, up to 10,000 spectators can attend sporting events in New South Wales. Pubs, cafes and restaurants can have an unlimited numbers of patrons, on the unenforceable proviso that each of has one square metre of space. In Queensland and other states, nightclubs, an obvious potential source of mass transmission, are reopening.

These dangerous policies follow declarations by Prime Minister Morrison and the state and territory leaders that they will proceed with the “reopening,” regardless of how many new infections result.



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