

Limited lockdown imposed in Melbourne as COVID-19 surges in Australia

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Victorian Labor Premier Daniel Andrews yesterday announced the reintroduction of a partial lockdown across Melbourne, the state's most populous city, as a surge in coronavirus cases threatened to "spiral out of control."

The move was taken only after several weeks of growing infections. There were 191 confirmed cases across the state, the vast majority of them in Melbourne, in the 24 hours to yesterday morning. This was the highest daily tally for Victoria since the pandemic began.

Indicating widespread community transmission, health authorities said 37 of yesterday's cases were linked to "known clusters." Another 154 infections were "under investigation," so the source of transmission was unknown.

A further 134 new cases were revealed today. The vast majority, 123, were the result of the untraced spread of the virus.

The spike is an indictment of the state, territory and federal governments. Under the umbrella of the "national cabinet," they have overturned most lockdown measures over the past six weeks. This has been aimed at forcing a full return of the workforce to places of employment to ensure the resumption of corporate profit-making.

In Victoria, as in other states, this criminally-negligent policy has involved the complete resumption of face-to-face teaching in the schools, the reopening of cafes and restaurants and a relaxation of limits on gatherings.

Governments had declared that "reopening the economy" would result in increased infections. They claimed, however, that these could be "contained" through localised lockdowns, along with increased testing and contact tracing measures.

The experiences of the past fortnight have decisively refuted these assertions and revealed the immense dangers posed by the premature lifting of COVID-19 restrictions.

This has confirmed the warning made by the Socialist Equality Party in a June 3 statement: "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."

After a week and a half of growing cases, Andrews announced the introduction of lockdown measures in ten postcodes in northern and western Melbourne on July 1. As infections continued to rise, the inner-city suburbs of Flemington and North Melbourne were added to the list on Saturday.

Under the localised lockdown, residents were instructed they could only leave their homes for work, study, medical treatment or exercise. Saturday's announcement included a punitive, police enforced order imposed upon 3,000 residents in nine inner-city public housing towers, forbidding them from leaving their cramped flats for any reason whatsoever.

The local restrictions, however, have failed to halt the spread of the virus. As many as half of the active cases over the past week have been in areas that were not subject to the restrictions.

Only when new daily case numbers hit triple figures did Andrews move to impose lockdown measures across Melbourne. The decision came as epidemiologists warned of an imminent danger of an exponential growth in infections.

Professor Robery Booy, an infectious diseases expert at the University of Sydney, told Nine Media that without city-wide restrictions, the number of daily cases in Victoria could have reached 3,000 by the end of the July.

As with the measures introduced when the pandemic began in March, the Melbourne lockdown is aimed at ensuring minimum disruption to big business. While leaving homes is permitted for "essential" activities, this includes work and study.

Factories, warehouses, construction sites and other workplaces that pose a risk of mass transmission are permitted to continue their operations.

Schools are set to resume classroom teaching when term three begins next week. Andrews yesterday stated that schools would be partly "pupil free" during the first week of

teaching. Year 11 and 12 students and year 10 VCE, however, will return to class on Monday. All students in specialist schools will be taught face-to-face.

Teachers of these cohorts will be forced into classrooms, despite the surge in infections. Those who cover other classes will be required to go to school to “prepare for a possible move to remote and flexible learning” and to care for the children of essential workers. The state government has not ruled out a complete resumption of classroom teaching on July 20.

The lockdown does not apply to regional and rural areas. This is despite evidence of transmission throughout the state, including two confirmed positive cases in Albury-Wodonga on the New South Wales-Victoria state border.

Extensive commentary in the media has focused on the role of failed hotel quarantines in the recent rise in infections. The Victorian government revealed last week that many outbreaks had been traced to security guards tasked with overseeing returned travellers in hotel quarantines.

The debacle has highlighted the bankrupt character of the pro-business response to the pandemic. Low-paid private security guards with virtually no training were placed on one of the front lines of an unprecedented health emergency.

The corporate media outlets have remained largely silent on the fact that the spike is the direct result of the “reopening” agenda that they supported. Schools and workplaces have emerged as centres of infection.

Over the past fortnight, five infections have been reported at Coles’ Laverton warehouse. On the weekend, one worker tested positive at the Pacific Meat abattoir in Thomastown and another at the JBS meatworks in Brooklyn.

Cases have been reported among McDonald’s fast-food workers, retail shop staff, Bunnings hardware store employees and Woolworths supermarkets.

Dozens of separate schools have been affected, contradicting government and media claims they were unlikely to be places of transmission. Over the past three weeks, more than 33 schools and a dozen kindergartens have been closed temporarily across Melbourne after students and educators tested positive to COVID-19.

At the Al-Taqwa College in the city’s outer-west, 90 teachers and pupils have contracted the virus, forcing the entire student cohort of 2,000, along with 300 staff members, into quarantine.

Indicating the extent of the crisis, the virus is again spreading through the healthcare system. More than 15 medical professionals in Melbourne have tested positive over the past week, including nine doctors and nurses at Northern Hospital in Epping and at least one doctor at St Vincent’s hospital. Forty-one patients with COVID-19 have been hospitalised. Nine people are in intensive care, a four-

fold increase over the past week.

At a press conference this afternoon, Prime Minister Scott Morrison insisted that the spike in Victoria would not halt the “national plan” to “reopen the economy.” State and territory leaders are pressing ahead with lifting restrictions, despite an appeal by the Australian Medical Association at the beginning of the week for a “freeze” on overturning the limited lockdown measures that remain.

Today’s *Australian Financial Review* editorial spelt out the calculations of the ruling elite. It forecast ongoing outbreaks, saying these would need to be met with “draconian” measures in affected areas, enforced by the police and the military. “[T]he price of clearing a path out of job- and business-killing lockdowns is to clamp down on new disease outbreaks without hesitation,” it declared.

The editorial was in line with the rejection by governments of any strategy to eradicate the coronavirus entirely. It is also another warning of a turn to police state measures.

Already, 500 police officers are enforcing the brutal lockdown of 3,000 public housing residents in Melbourne. Hundreds more are policing yesterday’s closure of the New South Wales-Victoria border, while at least 300 soldiers are involved in the lockdown of Melbourne.

The use of the military and the police is establishing a precedent for their mobilisation to suppress the social and political struggles of the working class which are emerging in response to the corporate-driven official response to the pandemic, and the onslaught against workers’ jobs, wages and conditions that is accompanying it.



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