

Australia's national cabinet steps up “reopening” despite COVID-19 surge

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11 July 2020

A “national cabinet” meeting yesterday decided to ramp up its reopening of the economy even though its policies have triggered a major COVID-19 resurgence in Melbourne and signs of spread to other parts of Australia.

Like governments around the world—from Trump in the US to Bolsonaro in Brazil and Modi in India—their Australian counterparts are intent on pushing all workers back into workplaces, regardless of the worsening global pandemic, in order to restore corporate profits.

So far, the toll in Australia remains substantially lower than on other continents, but the same pattern has emerged. Since the national cabinet started lifting restrictions at breakneck speed in late May, the number of new confirmed infections has begun to soar.

There have been 1,870 in the past two weeks, taking the total since March to near 10,000. This week, the state of Victoria has registered higher totals than during the initial phase in March, before partial lockdowns were belatedly implemented.

Today, Victorian Labor Premier Daniel Andrews announced another 216 cases were confirmed in the state over the previous 24 hours, taking the two-day total to 504, with an additional death, the 107th nationally. Several new cases have been reported also in Sydney and Canberra in the past two days.

This outbreak is worse than the first phase because the cases come mainly from unknown sources of domestic transmission, rather than identified returned travellers. As is happening globally, workplaces such as meat plants, warehouses and fast food outlets have become hotspots of infection, along with schools, hospitals and aged care homes.

Yet, yesterday's national cabinet—a de facto national unity government of federal, state and territory

leaders—declared that it met to discuss “easing restrictions, helping Australians prepare to go back to work in a COVID-safe environment and getting the economy moving again.”

Despite describing the news from Victoria as “very concerning,” the leaders declared that their “Three-Step Framework for easing restrictions” must proceed.

They “recommitted” to “the strategy of suppression of COVID-19,” again ruling out any effort to eradicate the disease, because that would mean shutting down industries that have been kept operating throughout the crisis, including mining and construction sites.

The leaders went further, welcoming the Queensland Labor government's decision to reopen its borders to all states and territories, except Victoria, sparking a flood of people into Queensland's coastal tourism centres. They also adopted a Productivity Commission report laying out “deregulation opportunities.” That means exploiting the pandemic to further restructure the economy to boost profits at the expense of safety, the environment and workers' conditions.

The only modification to the reopening plan was a cap on the number of overseas arrivals. Some states have temporarily delayed border relaxations and go-aheads for huge crowds at football games, but not the return of school students and teachers to classrooms, even though the largest single outbreak, of more than 100 infections, is at a Melbourne school.

Having issued its instructions, the national cabinet adjourned for two weeks, until July 24, with Prime Minister Scott Morrison announcing he was taking a holiday break.

At the post-cabinet press conference, Morrison again emphasised the bipartisan unity between his National-Liberal government and the state and territory leaders, the majority of whom are from the opposition Labor

Party.

Morrison said the leaders had agreed to “stick to the plan, to stick to the strategy, and to ensure that is well resourced and well implemented.” He said: “That was the focus of the briefing that Premier Andrews gave to National Cabinet today and he received strong support from all of his colleagues.”

This united front is driven by concern that the deteriorating public health situation and accompanying economic crash could intensify discontent with the entire political establishment.

Morrison and his colleagues are continuing to blame individuals, particularly young and working-class people, for the COVID-19 surge, accusing them of ignoring social distancing. This is a diversion from the responsibility of the governments themselves.

New virus clusters began emerging in late May, starting in the Melbourne suburb of Keilor Downs, pointing to underlying community transmission. But on June 1 restrictions were eased in Victoria. Exactly two weeks later, daily infection numbers climbed back into the double digits, and continue to grow.

The national cabinet statement claimed: “Victoria is responding well, including expanding testing and tracing, with the support of Commonwealth and other states and territories.”

In reality, evidence is mounting of serious contact tracing and other public health failures in Victoria. Alarmed parents in Melbourne have told the media of dangerous delays in being informed by the health authorities of infections at their children’s schools. Shelley Turner said she waited 12 days for an official notice that her child had been in close contact with another student who had tested positive for COVID-19 at Flemington Primary School.

Victorian healthcare, aged care and disability workers are reporting shortages of personal protective equipment (PPE). Nurses and other hospital workers told the media of PPE being rationed. One disability worker said she and her colleagues had bought their own clear plastic folders for homemade face shields.

For four months, health workers have asked the state government for supplies of masks, gloves, eye masks and coveralls for hospital, pathology, disability and aged care staff.

Since Monday, at least 20 infections have been found among healthcare workers and their patients at eight

Melbourne hospitals, including the Northern Hospital, Broadmeadows Hospital, Austin Health, Royal Melbourne Hospital, Brunswick Private Hospital, St Vincent’s Hospital, the Alfred Hospital and the Royal Women’s Hospital

There have been at least 13 cases in aged care, including 11 among nursing home staff.

PPE shortages are not confined to Victoria. A survey of 500 healthcare workers across Australia found half were experiencing shortages. In some circumstances, only low-quality masks were available to aged care and disability workers.

Further revelations are coming from furious residents of the nine Melbourne public housing towers that the Labor government suddenly surrounded with 500 police last Saturday to impose a “hard lockdown” that trapped them inside their cramped apartments.

They are not just angry over being treated like criminals, without any welfare or counselling and no access to essential foods and other supplies for days. Ever since the coronavirus crisis began, residents had sent emails and made phone calls unsuccessfully asking the health department for hand sanitiser on every floor, regular deep cleaning of lifts and shared spaces, and public health information posted in multiple languages.

Brushing aside the danger to lives and livelihoods resulting from the coronavirus resurgence, the *Australian Financial Review* editorial today insisted that the overriding “task” is to “move ahead with opening up the rest of the country.” Such is the voice of the corporate elite and its governments.

As a Socialist Equality Party statement “Oppose the premature lifting of COVID-19 safety restrictions!” warned on June 3: “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.”



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