

Limited lockdowns fail to halt Australia's COVID-19 surge

Oscar Grenfell**13 July 2020**

Australia's COVID-19 resurgence over the past fortnight has refuted the claims of Labor and Liberal-National governments alike that they could contain coronavirus outbreaks by imposing localised restrictions, while pushing ahead with a pro-business "reopening of the economy."

Since May, operating via a bipartisan "national cabinet," the federal, state and territory governments have lifted measures aimed at limiting the spread of the pandemic. This has included resuming classroom teaching in schools, reopening retail businesses, easing restrictions on gatherings and driving workers back to their places of employment.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison and the state and territory leaders explicitly rejected any strategy of eliminating COVID-19 transmission, because the measures required would have too great an impact on corporate profit. Instead, they said it would be possible to create a "COVID Safe" economy, with the virus kept at low levels through expanded testing, contact tracing and localised lockdowns.

Two months after the lifting of lockdown measures began, this strategy—dictated by the interests of big business rather than the health of ordinary people—is resulting in higher rates of infection than at the beginning of the pandemic, increasing hospitalisations and deaths.

In Melbourne, the Victorian capital, transmission is spiralling out of control. Cases are emerging throughout the city, in regional areas across Victoria and elsewhere in Australia.

This morning, Victorian Labor Premier Daniel Andrews announced 177 new cases in the state, following 274 on Sunday. Over the past four days, 956 infections have been reported in Victoria, the largest spike yet in Australia.

While case numbers are, as yet, lower than in the global epicentres of the pandemic, including the United States, India and Brazil, the same tendencies are evident: The

government and business "reopening" is causing a disaster.

The vast majority of Victorian cases over the past week have been the result of community transmission, rather than returned overseas travelers, signalling widespread circulation of the virus. The health authorities have described most of those cases as "under investigation," meaning that the transmission source is unknown. This also indicates a breakdown of contact-tracing.

Melbourne's clusters have emerged at major centres of infection internationally, such as warehouses, abattoirs, schools and high-density, low-income housing. Some two dozen health workers have contracted the virus, amid ongoing shortages of protective equipment and crowded waiting rooms.

COVID-19 hospitalisations in Melbourne have risen from fewer than 20 at the beginning of this month, to 72. Doctors are warning there is no capacity in the health system to cope with a further surge.

After daily case numbers in Melbourne returned to double-digits on June 15, the Andrews government rejected calls for the reintroduction of restrictions. This was in line with the national "reopening" program that produced the further easing of restrictions in Victoria on June 1.

Only on July 1, more than two weeks after the spike began, did Andrews announce a limited lockdown covering 11 Melbourne postcodes deemed coronavirus "hotspots." Residents were advised, however, to continue going to work, schools and other places of study.

That measure failed to contain the spread. Rapid transmission occurred outside the initial lockdown zone, including in public housing towers in the inner-city suburbs of North Melbourne and Flemington.

On July 4, Andrews announced an unprecedented "hard lockdown" of nine of the public housing towers. Without any warning, hundreds of police descended upon almost

3,000 residents, telling them they could not leave their cramped apartments for at least five days.

This effective house arrest was carried out in the most punitive manner, with the government displaying complete indifference to the welfare of the vulnerable residents. For days, many were not provided with adequate food, while their requests for hand sanitiser and protective equipment were rebuffed.

Five days later, the Victorian government lifted the hard lockdown at all but one of the towers. When it began, fewer than 50 tenants were infected. By yesterday, that number had soared to 237.

Criminally, residents infected with COVID-19 were not evacuated from the towers, nor were those most susceptible to the virus. Combined with the lack of services, this appeared to transform the overcrowded towers into virus incubators.

A partial lockdown of metropolitan Melbourne came into effect last Friday, as transmission rates grew outside the initial “hotspots.” As with the limited measures imposed in March-April, the lockdown will not impact on most businesses, especially large corporations.

Workplaces posing a high risk of transmission, including factories and construction sites, will remain open, despite clusters being detected at Woolworths and Coles supermarket warehouses, two Melbourne abattoirs and in fast food and retail outlets.

Schools are reopening today for the beginning of term three with a reduced student cohort. Year 10, 11 and 12 students will return to classrooms, along with students at specialised schools. The resumption, supported by the education unions, is occurring in the face of widespread opposition from teachers and principals, and despite infections forcing the temporary closure of more than 30 schools in recent weeks.

The state Labor government is pressing ahead, even though its own medical experts have admitted higher student-to-student transmission than previously acknowledged, with the older cohort that is returning the most likely to spread the virus. Teachers, including those whose students are staying home, are being forced to attend schools, placing their health and lives at risk.

The Melbourne lockdown has not halted the spread of the virus throughout Victoria. Cases have been confirmed in regional and rural areas, including Geelong, Bendigo, South Gippsland and Shepparton. The Australian Medical Association warned yesterday that these outbreaks could grow rapidly, with limited testing in the affected regions.

A border closure between Victoria and New South

Wales (NSW) has not succeeded in preventing the virus spreading to other states either. The shutdown, enforced by hundreds of police and soldiers, has created a crisis in border towns. Thousands of people, however, have been granted exemptions.

Yesterday, NSW state Premier Gladys Berejiklian, whose Liberal-National government has lifted most coronavirus restrictions, warned that NSW was at a “crossroads.” An outbreak at a pub in Casula, a working-class suburb in southwestern Sydney, has resulted in 21 infections so far. More than 1,000 people who visited the hotel have been asked to self-isolate.

No new cases have been reported in the state of Queensland, but its Labor government opened it to interstate travel last week in a bid to resume profits in the lucrative tourist industry, creating the conditions for a further expansion of the outbreak.

Government leaders insisted at a national cabinet meeting last Friday that they will proceed with the reopening, regardless of the consequences. The ruling class interests dictating this response found voice today in the Murdoch-owned *Australian* newspaper. Its lead article said corporate chiefs “are urging national cabinet to provide policy certainty and maintain momentum in reopening the economy.”

The *Australian*’s editorial advocated the same localised measures that have failed to contain the Victorian outbreak. Citing Australian Industry Group chief executive Innes Willox, it declared: “Despite our best efforts, periodic pop-ups of COVID-19 will continue but we ‘can’t keep taking a sledgehammer to our economy time and time again and expect businesses to survive.’”

What is being promoted is a variant of the “herd immunity” policy that has led to mass deaths internationally. Ordinary people must “live with the virus,” workers must be forced into workplaces so they can be exploited and public health measures must be curtailed, all so that corporate profits can be revived.

This demonstrates again that the fight against the pandemic is inseparable from a struggle by the working class against capitalism and its subordination of every aspect of social and economic life to the dictates of the financial oligarchy.



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