

Australian governments reject lockdowns, as Victoria hits highest daily infection toll

Oscar Grenfell
16 July 2020

In response to an ongoing surge in coronavirus cases, including in her own state, New South Wales (NSW) Liberal Premier Gladys Berejiklian has spelled out the pro-business calculations underlying the refusal of governments to implement measures required to protect the population.

In media interviews over the past two days, Berejiklian has ruled out the reimposition of lockdowns, which have been prematurely lifted by governments across the country as part of a back-to-work campaign that mirrors the criminal policies being enforced in the US, Britain and internationally.

Speaking on Channel Nine's "A Current Affair" program on Tuesday night, Berejiklian declared that the population would simply need to accept that they are "in a pandemic." They will "have to live with it."

"We cannot shut down every time we have a cluster of cases," she declared, because this would "create chaos for businesses" and dent corporate "confidence."

Berejiklian insisted that there would be no return to a lockdown, regardless of the extent of infections. "I don't ever want to be in a situation again where we have to lockdown NSW. We've done that, we did it well, we came together and now what we need to do is keep working together," she stated.

The NSW premier, whose stance is fully supported by the state's Labor opposition, has simply blurted out in more explicit terms a position held by the entire political and financial establishment. All of them agree that the health and lives of workers must be sacrificed on the altar of corporate profits.

In response to a major spike of infections in Victoria, which has now spread to NSW, the bipartisan national cabinet, composed of state and federal governments, declared last Friday that it would proceed with the "reopening" agenda that has already led to thousands of

new infections.

The leading organs of the financial press, including the *Australian* and the *Financial Review*, are denouncing any suggestion that governments pursue a strategy aimed at the elimination of COVID-19 transmission. This was rejected at the beginning of the pandemic, on the grounds that the lockdowns required would have too great an impact on corporate operations.

The papers are also reprising earlier "death calculus," with sociopathic commentators weighing the cost of measures to contain the virus against the toll of deaths. They invariably concluded by noting that those who die after infection are primarily older, meaning that the "reopening" can proceed.

The criminal character of these policies has been shown by the rapid increase in infections in Victoria, which neighbours NSW.

Today, Victorian health authorities announced 317 new cases, the highest daily tally in any state since the pandemic began. This follows six straight days of new infections close to, or above, 200, bringing the total number of active infections to almost 2,000. Two deaths were also announced, meaning that there have been seven fatalities over the past six days.

There are fewer cases in NSW, with fifteen infections announced today, after several days of double-digit increases.

The dangers of a rapid spread, however, have been demonstrated by the largest cluster, at the Crossroads Hotel in south-western Sydney. In the space of a week, 40 patrons or their contacts have tested positive. Officials revealed yesterday that some of them had become infectious as quickly as a day after they contracted the virus.

Across NSW, more than 20 establishments have been

closed for cleaning following confirmed cases over the past week. Many of them are pubs, restaurants and gyms—venues that were opened as part of the back-to-work campaign that began in May, despite the fact that they pose a threat of widespread transmission.

While refusing to institute a lockdown, Berejiklian has implemented a handful of cosmetic changes, which only highlight the negligent policies of her government. Venues are now permitted to have 300 patrons on their premises, down from the previous 500, while group bookings for pubs and restaurants have been lowered from 20 to 10.

Even these minor alterations are being undermined in the interests of big business. The Star, Sydney's largest casino, has been granted an exemption, just days after the business was fined \$5,000 for violating social distancing regulations. The casino has an annual revenue close to \$2 billion.

Some commentators have noted eerie parallels between the current situation in NSW and what was taking place in Victoria several weeks ago. Community transmission, which appeared to have been almost eliminated in NSW, is again underway. Clusters and "hotspots" are emerging, especially in working-class areas, while authorities are struggling to trace the origin of a number of the infections.

Only one month ago, on June 16, just nine new cases were reported in Victoria. Two weeks earlier, on June 1, the state had confirmed a sole infection.

For an entire fortnight, as infections increased in the latter half of June, the state Labor government of Premier Daniel Andrews did nothing. On July 1, it implemented a localised lockdown of 11 "hotspot" postcodes, in line with the national strategy of "containing," rather than eradicating, the virus.

Only on July 10, when daily infections reached a record of 288, did Andrews impose a partial lockdown of all of Melbourne. It is now clear that this was only announced after the spread of the virus was already out of control.

As with the lockdowns in March–April, the current measures do not impinge on most businesses. Factories, warehouses and meatworks remain in operation, despite being centres of growing infection. School teachers and an older cohort of students returned to Victorian classrooms this week, in the face of widespread opposition from educators.

The Melbourne health system is at breaking point. Yesterday it was revealed that 114 doctors and nurses have contracted the virus, up from around 20 a week ago. Some 14,000 health workers across the state have offered to assist in Melbourne hospitals, amid fears that they will face a staffing crisis.

At least 54 cases have been detected in 39 Victorian aged-care homes, which have been the main centres of death throughout the pandemic.

There are 105 Victorians with the coronavirus in hospital, a figure that has more than doubled in the past five days. Around a quarter of those are in intensive care, with most requiring ventilators to breathe.

Victorian chief health officer Brett Sutton stated yesterday: "There's often 10 to 20 percent of all coronavirus infections who require hospitalisation, so that's a couple of hundred individuals at least" who will be hospitalised over the coming days.

Doctors have already spoken out anonymously, to warn that there is no "surge capacity" in the hospital system. It was revealed earlier this week that government promises to increase the number of intensive care beds and ventilators were "quietly shelved."

Contact tracing is failing, with the majority of cases announced each day being of "unknown origin," meaning that the source of transmission has not been established. Victorian authorities have been accused of violating their own guidelines to test all contacts of confirmed infections, apparently due to a lack of personnel.

The crisis is not simply the result of the highly-infectious virus. It stems from the refusal of governments to carry out public health measures that would impinge on the interests of the corporate and financial oligarchy. As is the case internationally, the fight against the pandemic is also the fight against the capitalist system.



To contact the WSWP and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact