

Australian medical experts call for workplace and school shutdowns as Victoria's COVID-19 surge escalates

Oscar Grenfell
18 July 2020

A group of prominent epidemiologists issued a call yesterday for a strict lockdown of Victoria, including the closure of schools and non-essential businesses, as coronavirus transmission in the state continues, despite the imposition of limited restrictions across Melbourne.

The appeal came as Victoria surpassed the previous record for the most daily infections in a state for the third time in a week, with 428 new cases recorded yesterday.

Today's tally of 217 new infections follows 317 on Thursday, and is the ninth straight day of infections approaching or above 200 in the state. There are well over 2,100 active cases in Victoria, the highest figure since the pandemic began.

The number of people who are requiring hospitalisation and intensive care is rising, with warnings that hundreds more people will become seriously ill over the coming week.

In a letter to the *Medical Journal of Australia* published yesterday, the health experts warned that the existing partial lockdown of Melbourne would fail to "clear" community transmission of the virus prior to its scheduled conclusion in five weeks time. This meant that even if the current outbreak was contained, further surges would be all but inevitable.

The epidemiologists, who include University of Melbourne professors Dr Tony Blakely and Dr Jason Thompson, provided a detailed review of several potential public health responses and concluded with a ten-point plan.

It advocates the immediate closure of all schools, warning that while children may be less likely to become severely unwell, they can contract and transmit the virus. Teachers and staff, many of whom are in at risk demographics, are also being exposed to danger.

The doctors bluntly state that it is necessary to "Tighten the definition of essential shops to remain open. Supermarkets and chemists need to remain open. However, department stores, hardware stores, and such like should be closed."

They also call for a "tightening" of the definition of

"essential workers," a category that was described by Prime Minister Scott Morrison in March as including "anyone who has a job." This has resulted in broad sections of the workforce being compelled to remain on the job, solely in the interests of corporate profit. Tens of thousands of construction workers, for instance, have been placed at risk throughout the pandemic, so that multi-billion dollar property development, deemed as "essential," proceeds.

The epidemiologists advocate the establishment of an advisory group of experts, and for the agenda, papers and minutes of discussions on the response to the virus to be made publicly-available.

This demand follows the refusal of Victorian authorities to provide clear information on such crucial issues as the extent of capacity in the hospital system and the number of medical institutions hit by outbreaks, and revelations of cover-ups, including how many health workers have been infected.

While it is written in the cautious language customary for medical journals, the letter is a clear rebuke of the state and federal governments that have prematurely lifted coronavirus restrictions since May, as part of a pro-business back-to-work drive. It is a further exposure of the criminally negligent character of this campaign, which has been motivated by the predatory interests of the corporate and financial elite, rather than any public health considerations.

Most significantly, the epidemiologists explicitly call for a strategy aimed at eliminating community transmission of COVID-19 in Victoria.

All of the governments, Liberal and Labor alike, have previously rejected this on the grounds that the lockdowns required would have too great an impact on business. Instead, they have agreed to a "suppression" strategy, under which the virus continues to circulate, but will supposedly be kept at "manageable levels" through localised restrictions, contact-tracing and testing.

The consequences of this policy have played out in Victoria's surge over the past several weeks. As case

numbers grew rapidly, the Labor government of Premier Daniel Andrews imposed a limited lockdown in ten Melbourne postcodes at the beginning of the month.

Only when it was clear that the measure had failed to contain the spread was a lockdown of all of Melbourne introduced on July 10.

As the epidemiologists' letter indicates, however, the lockdown is largely in name only. It includes measures restricting private social interactions and public gatherings, but stops at the gates of schools and most workplaces.

Teachers throughout the state were forced to return to schools last week, along with an older cohort of students, despite more than 40 schools and 90 child care centres having to temporarily close last term after infections were detected. The worst outbreak, at Al-Taqwa College in Melbourne's west, has resulted in almost 160 cases.

Large workplaces, including factories and meatworks, where social distancing is impossible, are also emerging as centres of infection. Clusters have broken out at two meatworks in Melbourne, with 37 infections at Somerville Retail Services in Tottenham and 29 cases at JBS Australia at Brooklyn.

Smaller clusters have been linked to city offices that have remained open, along with retail outlets and restaurants.

There are dozens of cases at 32 aged-care facilities across the state, while today's cases included the first known infection of an Australian prisoner, prompting fears of a rapid spread through the penitentiary system. There are small case numbers in most rural and regional centres.

The healthcare system is on the precipice of a breakdown, with hundreds of doctors and nurses infected. Victorian authorities revealed yesterday that more than 150 health workers currently have COVID-19, but refused to say which facilities they had been working at. One report by Nine Media cited a union source who claimed that 800 medical staff across Victoria are either infected or self-isolating because they have potentially been exposed to the virus.

Hospitalisations have surged, with at least 110 people currently requiring treatment, a figure that has doubled in the space of a less than week. Around a quarter of them are in intensive care.

Two more deaths were reported this morning, bringing the state's total since the pandemic began to 34. That figure was just 23 on July 10.

Announcing yesterday's record infection toll, Victorian chief health officer Brett Sutton spoke of "our daily tragedy." He noted that of the 428 people who had contracted the virus, dozens would fall seriously ill, and at least several would die. The medical official correctly warned that even those who recover could be left with symptoms for months, years or even the rest of their lives.

But today, the tone was very different. Premier Andrews said the tally of 217 new infections was a "relief," because it was lower than Friday. He brushed over the fact that 205 of the infections are "still under investigation," meaning that their origin is unknown and indicating widespread community transmission.

Andrews rejected calls for tighter lockdown measures, branding any changes as "premature," a stand supported by the Morrison Coalition government.

In response, corporate journalists, who have functioned as the affluent cheerleaders of the pro-business "reopening of the economy," rushed to Twitter to proclaim their "relief" that "only" 217 people had been infected with a potentially deadly virus. The two victims of the pandemic, whose deaths were announced this morning, barely rated a mention.

Meanwhile, in New South Wales, the state Liberal government has ruled out any lockdown measures, however partial. Infections are continuing to be reported in the state each day, in either the high single digits or the low double digits. Community transmission appears to have resumed, with some cases of "unknown origin."

The official response to the surge is a graphic demonstration that the fight against the pandemic, including for the implementation of the recommendations of public health experts, requires the independent political intervention of the working class. The struggle against the pandemic is inseparable from the fight against the corporate and financial elite and the governments that represent it.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact