

Australian coronavirus surge hits Sydney

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The continued surge in coronavirus infections has extended from Melbourne into Sydney, Australia's largest city.

Acting Chief Medical Officer Paul Kelly revealed on Sunday that the basic reproduction rate (R0) is 1.4 in Sydney and New South Wales (NSW), even higher than neighbouring Victoria, which continues to have the largest number of active infections. This effectively means that for every two people who become infected, three more are catching it from them, posing the dangers of an exponential growth.

Eighteen cases were reported in NSW on Sunday, followed by twenty on Monday. While the absolute figures remain relatively low, it is clear that community transmission is once again underway. Commentators have noted parallels between the current situation in NSW, and that which existed several weeks ago in Victoria, a state that is now recording hundreds of infections every day.

Despite the dangers, the NSW Liberal government, like its counterparts across the country, is proceeding with a pro-business campaign to compel employees back to work in the interests of corporate profit.

This was underscored by the reopening of schools throughout NSW yesterday. Even though state health authorities warned on Sunday of an "inherent risk" connected to public transport, the following day thousands of students and teachers were forced onto the trains and the buses to get to classes. In a particularly criminal move, educators at a high risk of succumbing to coronavirus, including those with suppressed immune systems, have also been compelled to return to schools.

There are now multiple clusters being investigated across NSW, with hotels, restaurants, shopping centres and gyms among the affected venues. The worst remains the Crossroads Hotel in Casula, a working-class suburb in Sydney's outer west, which has 50 infections linked to the venue. These include 15 people who visited the hotel on July 3 and July 5, as well as 33 people who did not go to the hotel but had contact with those who did.

The cluster is connected with multiple other venues that

have been classified as hotspots, with anyone present during affected dates asked to be tested and to self-isolate, even if the test result is negative. Venues include a freight company in Wetherill Park, Our Lady of Lebanon Cathedral in Harris Park and Thai Rock Restaurant in Wetherill Park, where 10 of the 13 new cases in the state that were reported today originate from.

For other at-risk venues, the official advice for people who may have been present at the same time as a confirmed coronavirus case is only to self-monitor for symptoms and to get tested if these emerge. These include Westfield shopping centre in Mount Druitt, Bankstown, YMCA in Revesby, and McDonald's in Albion Park.

Management of at least two affected venues were kept in the dark by health department officials. Jack Carter, who runs the Village Inn in the inner-Sydney suburb of Paddington, told the *Sydney Morning Herald* that he only learned that a potentially infectious person had been at his pub through media reports. Operators of the C1 Speed Go Karting centre in Albion Park were advised by NSW Health inspectors to do a deep clean, but were not told that a coronavirus patient had attended the venue while infectious.

Most of the affected sites are in Sydney's working-class areas, in contrast to the initial stages of the pandemic when many infections were registered in upper-middle class families returning from international holidays.

The uptick in cases is the direct result of the negligent policies of federal and state governments, Labor and Liberal, which prioritise the demands of big business and finance capital ahead of public health and safety.

Last Tuesday, New South Wales Liberal Premier Gladys Berejiklian declared: "We cannot shut down every time we have a cluster of cases... I don't ever want to be in a situation again where we have to lockdown NSW." She added this would "create chaos for businesses" and affect corporate "confidence," and insisted that "we need to accept that people need to go to work."

This is nothing but a rejection of medical and epidemiological science. Strict lockdown measures have

been proven as the most effective way of quickly suppressing transmission of COVID-19, preventing mass infections and mass deaths. Yet governments in Australia, like their international counterparts, are refusing to take the necessary measures in order to maintain corporate profit rates.

Berejiklian, like her counterparts in Victoria and other states, is seeking to lay the blame for the rise in infections on individuals she accuses of not properly socially distancing. This is a transparent effort to evade scrutiny of her government's refusal to halt large gatherings at corporate venues, such as pubs, clubs and Luna Park.

The federal Liberal-National government of Prime Minister Scott Morrison today announced additional measures to coerce workers back into unsafe workplaces, centred on the slashing of its pandemic wage subsidies and welfare benefits. This threatens to impoverish more than three million unemployed or under-employed workers.

JobKeeper wage subsidy payments will be extended beyond the original September cut-off date for some businesses. But it will be at a rate reduced from \$1,500 to \$1,200 a fortnight for an additional three months, and then to \$1,000 for the next three months to March 30. There will be even steeper cuts to \$750, and then \$650, for part-time or casual employees on less than 20 hours a week.

At the same time, the \$1,115 fortnightly JobSeeker unemployment and welfare allowance will be cut by \$300 a fortnight to \$805, just marginally above the starvation level of \$556 a fortnight for the pre-COVID Newstart jobless payment. This level may be cut further after December 31. In the meantime, recipients will be compelled to actively search for work, despite the lack of jobs, and will be penalised if they reject a job, no matter how poor the pay and conditions.

While meeting the demands of big business for an extension of JobKeeper subsidies, precisely because of the resurgence of COVID-19 in Victoria and NSW, the government was explicit about pushing employees into workplaces despite the worsening danger. It cited Treasury advice that the current payment rates for workers "potentially blunted their incentives to work, or to take on additional hours of work."

The pandemic meanwhile continues to worsen in the state of Victoria. Limited lockdown measures have been put in place in Melbourne and neighbouring Mitchell Shire, with people only permitted to leave their homes to exercise, purchase groceries and supplies, care for others, or to go to work and study. Wearing masks or face

coverings is mandatory from Thursday.

Yet schools remain open, with all Years 11 and 12 students attending, together with many other children, including those with disabilities and those whose parents cannot work from home. In addition, no non-essential industries have been closed, despite the recent revelation that 80 percent of all coronavirus infections since May have occurred within workplaces (see: "Australian coronavirus surge hits workplaces, factories").

As a result, it remains unclear whether the limited lockdown will work to flatten the curve of infections. Daily positive cases remain at record levels. Earlier today another 374 cases were reported. Of these, only a minority, 62, have been connected to known outbreaks, while 312 are under investigation. This indicates continued large-scale community infection. Three more deaths were also registered in Victoria. Another 174 people are being treated in hospital for COVID-19, with 36 of them in intensive care.

The state's intensive care capacity is at 82 percent. Unless the infection rate is lowered, the hospital system will soon be overwhelmed.

This danger is being covered up by the state government, which is refusing to comment on either intensive care emergency surge capacity or on the number of infected healthcare workers. According to the *Guardian*, 429 healthcare workers have contracted COVID-19, with 164 of these active, while hundreds more are in quarantine awaiting test results. President of the Victorian branch of the Australian Medical Association, Julian Rait, has demanded "transparency" from the government, with proper reporting of the number of infections occurring in hospitals and medical centres.

Rait also demanded the provision of more effective personal protective equipment (PPE), including fitted n95 masks and face shields. He revealed the extraordinary fact that official guidelines still allow doctors and nurses to deal with confirmed COVID-19 cases equipped only with gloves and loose fitting surgical masks. This is further evidence of the government's inadequate and neglectful response to the pandemic.



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