

Australia's COVID-19 death toll rising rapidly

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As Australia's coronavirus fatalities mounted on a daily basis, the "national cabinet" that effectively rules the country outside the constitutional framework of parliament, yesterday reaffirmed the pro-business policies that have resulted in a major spike in infections over the past six weeks.

The gathering of state, territory and federal government leaders graphically demonstrated that the official response to the pandemic is dictated by the profit interests of the corporate elite, not public health or science. Their media statement said they discussed "easing restrictions" and "getting the economy moving again."

Acting chief medical officer Paul Kelly said the "main issue" at the meeting was to "recommit to the suppression strategy" adopted at the beginning of the pandemic.

This involves allowing community transmission of the virus to continue, on the pretext that any outbreaks can be contained. Its consequence has been the resurgence of infections, with the pandemic spiralling out of control.

There are some 4,000 active cases in the state of Victoria, the current epicentre, with hundreds of new infections every day. This compares with just two new cases across Australia on June 9, shortly after the governments began their premature lifting of partial shutdown measures.

The reaffirmation of this "strategy" was a rebuke of epidemiologists, who have called for adequate lockdown measures, especially in the Victorian capital of Melbourne. They have raised the need for the closure of all schools, along with non-essential workplaces, both of which have been major centres of transmission.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison gave voice to the ruling elite's criminal indifference to the health and safety of ordinary people. He declared there was some "better news from Victoria." On the same day, 300 new cases were announced in the state and seven people died. Five more deaths were announced this morning, bringing the total to

18 over the past three days, the fastest increase in fatalities yet, together with 357 new cases and 15 in neighbouring NSW.

Morrison insisted that the national cabinet would proceed with its "three-stage plan," unveiled at the end of May, for the full "reopening of the economy," even as the virus spreads.

Addressing the National Press Club yesterday, federal Treasurer Josh Frydenberg spelt out the calculations. "A strict elimination strategy would cripple our economy and require us to shut down many more sectors and not allow anyone to enter the country," he said.

Instead, workers are being pushed back into unsafe workplaces to allow for the resumption of corporate profit-making. Some 80 percent of infections in Victoria have originated in workplaces, including factories, warehouses and retail outlets.

The national cabinet is also imposing a further pro-business restructuring of the economy, centred on massive tax cuts for the wealthy, a union-enforced overhaul of industrial relations and the elimination of "red-tape."

The only other substantive announcement from the meeting was a "streamlining" of environmental regulations. All the leaders agreed to fast-track some 15 corporate developments, worth an estimated \$17 billion.

Morrison said there was "unanimous support" for "single touch approvals" for projects, reducing to a minimum any scrutiny of the environmental impact of big business developments.

Meanwhile, COVID-19 fatalities are set to soar. There are some 206 coronavirus patients in Victorian hospitals, with 42 in intensive care. That compares to fewer than 20 hospital patients at the beginning of July.

Morrison flatly rejected any suggestion of failure by aged-care operators, despite the sector emerging as the main centre of death and serious questions being raised about safety measures.

There are now 536 cases linked to 40 aged-care facilities across Melbourne's metropolitan area, with five new outbreaks detected late last week. Of Victoria's seven deaths on Friday, five were linked to nursing homes.

Staff members, many forced to work without personal protection equipment, are being infected in the dozens. They are among the most exploited and lowly-paid sections of the working class. Many are employed on a part-time basis in multiple facilities, creating the conditions for widespread transmission.

Professor Julian Rait, Victorian president of the Australian Medical Association, warned on Thursday that the sector may not have a sufficient healthy staff to continue functioning. "We are concerned aged care may be so under pressure in just the next few days it will cause collapse and severe system stress," Rait warned. Already there are reports of aged care employees being bussed in from interstate.

The Victorian Labor government of Premier Daniel Andrews is continuing the policies that resulted in large fatalities at nursing homes in the neighbouring state of New South Wales early in the pandemic. It is refusing to hospitalise most aged care patients who test positive, even though they are in an extreme at-risk demographic, instead waiting until they are gravely-ill.

There is a shortage of capacity in the chronically underfunded public healthcare system. By today, 313 healthcare workers had contracted COVID-19. According to media reports, hundreds more have had to self-isolate after coming into contact with the virus. Already a "reserve" of doctors who do not normally work in the hospital system has been called upon, in an attempt to prevent a collapse of staffing levels.

Some 20 percent of those hospitalised are under the age of 50. That refutes the claims of many politicians and media outlets that young people are unlikely to fall seriously ill after they contact the virus.

Four of the patients in Victorian hospitals are school-aged children. Their plight demonstrates the criminality of the Labor government's resumption of face-to-face classroom teaching for older students last week. Within days, multiple schools have been forced to close after cases were identified.

Michelle Spence, a senior intensive care nurse at the Royal Melbourne Hospital, told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation yesterday: "What we are seeing now is young people who are going to die. There is no doubt about it. And these are people who are 30s, 40s,

50s, who have no past history."

The *Herald Sun* reported yesterday that some doctors are forecasting up to 700 weekly hospital admissions in Melbourne, if urgent action is not taken. Some were calling for the immediate imposition of harder "stage four" lockdown measures, to prevent a collapse of the hospital system.

Attempts to trace the disease have broken down. Most new cases announced each day are "under investigation," so their source of origin is unknown. After a "testing blitz" last month, the Victorian government is again restricting access to tests. Individuals who have no symptoms, even if they have been in high-risk environments, can only be tested if they are contacted by the health authorities.

Infections in industry are surging. There are more than 40 cases at a Colac abattoir in regional Victoria, where there were no known cases at the beginning of the week.

Andrews has repeatedly accused ordinary people of failing to self-isolate after having been tested. In fact, most test recipients were not instructed to do so. Many, moreover, have been condemned to go to work, despite feeling unwell, because they are employed on a casual basis without sick leave.

There are now some 1,500 Australian army personnel in Victoria, patrolling streets and knocking on people's doors, threatening residents with fines and detention for allegedly failing to self-isolate. Another 1,500 military personnel are deployed in other states, including manning roadblocks.

The mobilisation of the military is a warning of the repressive measures being prepared, amid mounting opposition to the disastrous official response to the pandemic and the pro-business offensive against the working class.



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