

COVID-19 “state of disaster” imposed across Australian state of Victoria

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The state Labor Party government in Victoria announced yesterday that in response to spiralling coronavirus infections, it was imposing a “state of disaster” for at least six weeks across the state, including a curfew between 8 p.m. and 5 a.m. for Melbourne, Victoria’s capital.

Sweeping “Stage 4” measures in Melbourne include a five-kilometre limit on people’s movements, additional restrictions on leaving one’s residence, a shift to online learning for school students, restrictions on access to kindergartens and child care centres, a ban on weddings and maximum participation of five people in religious services, and a ban on all sporting and recreational activities. Restaurants and pubs are takeaway only, and some other services have been restricted, with food courts, beauty salons, and saunas among the venues closed.

Further restrictions were due to be announced today, including the possible closure of some workplaces and new restrictions on selected industries.

Victoria’s Chief Health Officer Brett Sutton characterised the measures as “shock and awe.”

Regional Victoria has been placed under the somewhat less restrictive “Stage 3,” which does not involve a curfew or travel limits, but restricts the permissible reasons for leaving residences. Throughout the state, wearing masks or face coverings in public is mandatory.

The unprecedented measures imposed represent an indictment of the federal Liberal-National government of Prime Minister Scott Morrison and the Victorian Labor government of Premier Daniel Andrews.

The Australian ruling class failed to take the necessary preventive measures from the beginning of the pandemic, did not invest the public health resources required for mass testing and contact tracing, and

throughout the emergency prioritised the demands of business over the safety of the population.

In April, Morrison and every state premier, Labor and Liberal, rejected epidemiological advice on how coronavirus infections could be eliminated. They instead insisted that a safe level of infection could be managed, and in May began to lift the limited restrictions that had been put in place.

The outcome has been a public health disaster. Yesterday Andrews effectively acknowledged that authorities had lost control over coronavirus community transmission.

On Sunday, the state recorded its second-highest daily total of 671 new cases, together with seven deaths, taking Victoria’s COVID-19 death toll to 153. Today another 429 cases were reported. In neighbouring New South Wales, infections are much lower but appear to trending upward. Today 13 new infections were reported, and Premier Gladys Berejiklian called for residents to be on “extra high alert.”

There are 760 active COVID-19 cases in Victoria that Andrews described as “mystery” infections—health authorities are investigating the cases but still have no idea where and how people caught the virus. An unknown number of other cases remain undetected.

Only around 20,000 to 35,000 daily tests have been done in Victoria over the past two months, though the state has a population of 6.4 million. At no point in the pandemic have preparations been made to test every resident of Melbourne, as has been done in other cities internationally, for example in Wuhan, China and Danang, Vietnam.

Medical scientists have demanded greater transparency with testing and infection data in Victoria. University of Melbourne epidemiologist John Mathews

told the *Age*: “The first question is what data do the government actually have? Because they haven’t really told us.” Many tests are being sent interstate due to inadequate infrastructure in Victoria. Mathews added that he believed delays in processing tests are a significant factor in the coronavirus spread.

Mary-Louise McLaws, professor of epidemiology at the University of New South Wales and adviser to the World Health Organisation, called for public investment in screening clinics and laboratories, including hiring more trained staff, so that people with COVID-19 symptoms did not have to wait days for test results.

A “state of disaster” has been declared only once before, at the beginning of this year during the bushfire crisis. That only applied, however, for several days, and to affected parts of regional Victoria.

The latest declaration gives the government and the police powers far beyond those of the existing “state of emergency,” though that remains in place. Under the Emergency Management Act, in a “state of disaster” the government can suspend any act of parliament or regulation deemed to “inhibit response to or recovery from the disaster” and issue directions that prevail over any legislation or law. All government agencies are subject to directives from the emergency services minister. Police and emergency services personnel have the authority to order evacuations and seize property.

No explanation was provided for the need for the virtually unlimited powers handed to the police and other authorised officers. Police Minister Lisa Neville yesterday declared that police would prohibit all protests.

The state Labor government, like its counterparts throughout Australia, has sought to avoid placing any restrictions on the activities of corporations amid the pandemic. This is despite the fact that 80 percent of all coronavirus infections in Melbourne have occurred within workplaces.

Low-wage and highly-casualised industries are among the worst affected. This includes the aged care sector, the meatworks industry and warehouses, where workers have been kept on the job by governments with the assistance of the trade unions.

The working class is beginning to take action in response. Around 45 meat workers at the JBS abattoir in Brooklyn, a western suburb of Melbourne, organised

a stopwork meeting last Tuesday to discuss safety provisions in the plant. The following day, 35 workers at the Spotless commercial laundry in South Dandenong, another suburb, refused to turn up for their shifts, following an outbreak of COVID-19 at the facility.

Earlier today, about 240 warehouse workers at the Woolworths Liquor Distribution Centre in Laverton, western Melbourne, took strike action. A worker tested positive on Friday, but the grocery corporate giant refused to close the warehouse and instead attempted to maintain normal operations.

Such initiatives need to be taken forward by other sections of workers, with the organisation of rank-and-file action and safety committees, completely independent of the pro-corporate unions, now a life and death question. These committees, democratically controlled by workers themselves should formulate, oversee and enforce safety and workplace standards. Where conditions are violated, there must be a stoppage of work.



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