

Amid COVID-19 “disaster,” Australian state government announces limited workplace closures

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Victorian Labor Premier Daniel Andrews yesterday announced the closure of some Melbourne workplaces and the curtailment of operations in a number of other industries. On Sunday, his government declared a “state of disaster” amid the ongoing surge of coronavirus infections.

The measures, to last six weeks, go hand-in-hand with an end to face-to-face school teaching in Melbourne, the current epicentre, as well as enhanced restrictions on movement, a ban on virtually all outdoor gatherings and on visiting other people’s homes. The “stage four” regulations are slated to last for the next six weeks in Melbourne, along with “stage three” requirements everywhere else in Victoria, mandating mask-wearing and curtailing social and other activities.

The announcement of the limited workplace shutdowns is an indictment of the Victorian government and the entire political establishment, including the “national cabinet” and the federal Liberal-National Coalition of Prime Minister Scott Morrison.

It is a tacit admission that the policies they have pursued since May, including a pro-business “reopening” of the economy and the premature lifting of lockdown measures, have resulted in a public health crisis.

Hundreds of new infections are being reported in Victoria every day and hospitalisation rates are surging. A further 439 confirmed Victorian cases, the majority of them in Melbourne, were announced today, following yesterday’s toll of 429 infections and 13 deaths, which equaled the previous daily record for fatalities.

Since Victorian case numbers began to rise in the latter half of June, the Andrews government has imposed a succession of localised and limited lockdowns, aimed above all at minimising the impact on big business.

This has been in line with the policy adopted by all governments in April, when they rejected calls from epidemiologists for a push to eliminate COVID-19 transmission as being too costly. Instead they opted for a “suppression strategy,” allowing the virus to continue to

circulate, while supposedly keeping its spread to “manageable” levels through contact-tracing, testing and localised restrictions.

Sunday’s declaration of a state of disaster occurred a little over three weeks after Andrews imposed a limited lockdown in Melbourne on July 10. Under those “stage three” restrictions, virtually all workplaces remained open, while classroom teaching was resumed for an older cohort of students, in defiance of widespread opposition from educators.

The consequence has been an ongoing surge of infections. The July 10 tally of 288 Victorian infections was, at that point, the highest daily toll in any state. That figure has since been repeatedly surpassed, culminating in Thursday’s record of 723 confirmed cases.

Under the limited lockdown, medical experts warned that infection rates were tending to double every 16 days. Workplace clusters continued to emerge on an almost daily basis, as Andrews admitted that places of employment had been the source of 80 percent of new cases since May.

At least 87 schools were forced to shut in the space of a fortnight after infections were detected. There are around 1,000 active cases in almost 100 aged-care facilities, amid ongoing revelations of criminally inadequate safety measures and a lack of staff due to the rampant casualisation of the workforce.

There has been a breakdown of contact-tracing, with the majority of daily cases being announced as “under investigation,” meaning their source has not been confirmed. More than 700 infections have been dubbed “mystery cases,” with the authorities having no idea of how transmission occurred.

Medical experts, who had been calling for sharper restrictions for weeks, had stepped up their warnings in the days preceding the imposition of “stage four” measures. In late July, doctors took to the press anonymously, to warn that if a “hard lockdown” were not imposed, hospital

admissions would rise by 700 every week and the system would be overwhelmed.

Already, there are almost 400 COVID-19 patients in Melbourne hospitals, up from 25 a month ago. Most strikingly, 706 cases have been confirmed among healthcare workers, many of them doctors and nurses in Melbourne hospitals, a figure that rose by 57 on Monday alone.

It is clear that the government only introduced the new measures amid real fears of an Italian or New York-style scenario of a complete breakdown of the healthcare system.

Under the workplace regulations, much of retail will be forced to close, while cafes and restaurants will only be able to provide takeaway. A number of factories will be shuttered, including in fields such as textile and metal production.

Broad sections of industry, however, are set to remain open. This includes many warehouses and factories as well as abattoirs, which been major centres of infection. They will be required to develop a “COVID-Safe” plan. In some cases this will mean sharp reductions in workforce numbers.

In announcing the measures yesterday, Andrews declared that they did not go as far as an earlier lockdown in New Zealand. This signals that the government is still seeking to keep some areas of the economy open solely in the interests of corporate profit.

The construction industry has been exempted from the shutdown, with Andrews describing it as the “lifeblood of the economy.” Property development is central to the fortunes of many billionaires, while a speculative housing bubble has boosted the wealth of the rich and compounded the social crisis for working people.

Major construction sites will remain in operation, supposedly with no more than 25 percent of their previous workforce on site, while only five employees will be permitted on small residential builds. The decision came after joint lobbying from the construction companies and the unions for an exemption. The sector has been allowed to remain open throughout the pandemic, jeopardising the safety of hundreds of thousands of workers.

In another pro-business decision, most mining will continue with a reduced workforce, including “fly-in fly-out” employees, whose movements across the state pose a particular danger of widespread transmission.

The cost of the business shutdowns will be borne by workers, sole traders and small businesspeople. The latter will be eligible for a \$5,000 government payment, following a previous subsidy of the same amount. Many have warned that this will still not enable them to pay the rent and utilities.

Some 250,000 more workers will likely be stood down or sacked, on top of the worst unemployment figures since the

1930s depression. Hundreds of thousands more jobs are set to be lost across the country, with the Victorian shutdown measures forecast to cut national GDP by \$3 billion per week.

The affected workers, many of them low-paid casuals, will only receive the meagre JobKeeper wage subsidy, which is set to be reduced in September. Rates of poverty will skyrocket.

At the same time, the lockdown measures are being accompanied by a boosting of police powers, triggered by the declaration of a state of disaster. This provides for sweeping search and seizure provisions, and allows the state government to override any act of parliament.

Today, the Victorian government announced that individuals who breach regulations can be subject to \$5,000 fines. This has gone hand in hand with a campaign to blame ordinary people for the surge, including unsubstantiated assertions that infected individuals are leaving their homes.

While restrictions are necessary to address the pandemic, the central role of the police and military in the crisis dovetails with a protracted build-up of the repressive powers of the state. This is directed above all against the working class.

Already, the worsening pandemic and the dangerous conditions enforced by governments and corporations have resulted in a stoppage by Melbourne cleaners last week and a strike yesterday by more than 200 Woolworths warehouse employees. JB's meat workers briefly walked off the job last week, while Diamond Valley Pork staff in the Melbourne suburb of Laverton have resisted unsafe conditions.

The announcement of limited workplace shutdowns is in part an attempt to head off this emerging movement of the working class, amid the unprecedented social, political and health crisis set-off by the pandemic.



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