

Victoria's COVID-19 catastrophe: An indictment of Australian governments and capitalism

The Socialist Equality Party (Australia)
5 August 2020

Sunday's announcement of an official "state of disaster" in Victoria, Australia's second most populous state, is a damning condemnation of Australian governments, Labor and Liberal-National alike, and of the capitalist profit-system they defend.

In little over six weeks, they have presided over a major resurgence of the coronavirus pandemic. Cases in Victoria, the epicentre, were in the single-digits in early June. They are now in the hundreds every day and are tracking toward a thousand or more. Hospitalisations are growing dramatically and the death toll is starting to rise sharply. Aged-care homes have become killing fields and the entire healthcare system is on the verge of a meltdown.

The "state of disaster" is not a medical response to the health crisis but a law and order reaction. The imposition of an 8pm-5am curfew throughout Melbourne has nothing to do with the urgently and sorely needed development of testing, contact tracing and health resources, including staff and personal protection equipment (PPE). It is of a piece with the "hard lockdown" inflicted by the state Labor Party government on nine public housing towers in Melbourne in June, when some of the poorest and most vulnerable sections of the working class were locked in their flats, surrounded by hundreds of police.

New South Wales, the country's largest population centre, is on the edge of a major outbreak, with new clusters emerging constantly. Infections are again being reported in states such as Queensland and South Australia, where community transmission of the virus was previously eliminated.

This is part of a global process. July was the deadliest month of the pandemic yet, witnessing some 7.2 million infections and more than 165,000 deaths. The *New York Times* and other international publications have noted that the resurgence of the coronavirus in Australia coincides with sharp increases in infections elsewhere where cases were previously low, including in Israel and Hong Kong.

The escalating health crisis is not a natural disaster or the outcome of the intrinsic characteristics of COVID-19. It is the direct consequence of the subordination of the health and safety of working people to the profit demands of the corporate and financial oligarchy, enforced by governments everywhere. Workers are being brought face to face with the reality that their most fundamental social interests, including to life itself, are incompatible with the capitalist system.

In Australia, the surge is the outcome of the premature lifting of the limited lockdown measures introduced by governments—under substantial pressure from medical experts and working people—when the pandemic struck in March.

Beginning in May, restrictions on social gatherings were eased,

closures of restaurants, pubs and other high-risk venues were overturned and face-to-face teaching was resumed in the schools. This was on top of the many industries kept open throughout the pandemic, including meatworks, factories, construction sites and mining projects.

The sole purpose of the reckless reopening was to create the conditions for a resumption of corporate profit-making, by herding all workers back to their places of employment. That this would result in an upsurge of the pandemic was entirely predictable and was warned of by epidemiologists and health professionals.

The Socialist Equality Party, which has been alone in advancing the independent interests of the working class throughout this crisis, issued a statement on June 3, entitled: "Oppose the premature lifting of COVID-19 safety restrictions!"

It declared: "Via decrees agreed by the so-called national cabinet, Liberal-National and Labor governments alike are gambling with the lives of the population. They are announcing accelerated 'reopening' measures almost daily. In their haste, they are sweeping aside previous timetables, long before the impact of the earlier lifting of restrictions has been revealed."

The warnings have come to pass in the tragic scenes unfolding in Victoria. The outbreak is refuting all the lying claims, peddled by governments and the corporate media, that Australia had escaped the worst of the health crisis and was somehow exempt from the breakdown of global capitalism that it has accelerated.

Australian governments did not explicitly embrace the homicidal doctrine of "herd immunity." But the same ruling class calculations have been evident in "death calculus" published in the Australian financial press, weighing the "cost" of necessary health measures against the human toll of the virus, and invariably concluding that any serious attempt to tackle COVID-19 would be an unacceptable impost on the bottom-line.

The "death calculus" was incorporated into official policy in April. State, territory and federal governments, acting through the extra-constitutional "national cabinet," rejected proposals from epidemiologists to adopt a strategy aimed at eradicating COVID-19 transmission. They insisted that would damage the "economy," by which they meant the fortunes of the ultra-wealthy and the largest businesses.

Instead, the de facto coalition government opted for a "containment" policy, under which the virus would be allowed to continue to circulate. The government leaders claimed that coronavirus transmission could be kept at manageable levels through expanded contact tracing, testing and localised restrictions when outbreaks

occurred.

This strategy has produced disastrous consequences in Victoria. When infections began to rise in the latter half of June, the state Labor government of Premier Daniel Andrews refused to implement any lockdown measures. Only as the spike rapidly intensified did his government begin introducing localised restrictions.

Beginning in early July, a succession of limited restrictions, confined initially to Melbourne “hotspot” suburbs and then being expanded to the entire city, were imposed. At each step the measures failed to contain transmission.

Above all, the Victorian government, with the support of the entire political establishment and the trade unions, rejected calls for the closure of schools and workplaces despite dozens of clusters emerging among educators and students. Andrews admitted that 80 percent of infections in the state since May were the result of workplace transmission.

Under the limited “stage three” lockdown of Melbourne, which began on July 10, the daily tally of infections rose from a record 288 to today’s new height of 725. The various claims that measures had been taken to cope with increased infections were revealed as lies, with no significant increase in hospital surge capacity or contact-tracing capabilities.

This criminal negligence intersected with decades of government cuts to healthcare and the rampant corporatisation of essential services. Aged-care homes have become centres of death as a direct result of the casualisation of their workforce and the refusal of their private operators to implement safety measures that would impinge on their massive profits. In March, the Victorian public health department responsible for tracking communicable diseases had just 14 staff members, only six of whom were fully-qualified physicians.

Only after the pandemic had spiralled out of control and amid fears of an Italian or New York-style collapse of the hospital system did the Andrews government invoke some “stage four” workplace closures in Melbourne on Sunday, while also imposing its “state of disaster.”

Even then, some of the most lucrative industries have been granted exemptions, including construction and mining. There is no pretence that the operations of these sectors, focussed on luxury property development and the extraction of minerals and gases, are “essential” to addressing the health crisis. Once again, their employees are being subjected to danger to ensure profits.

The impact of workplace closures, moreover, will be borne by the working class. Some 250,000 more workers are slated to be stood down or sacked, on top of the highest unemployment levels since the 1930s Great Depression. They will be provided with the meagre government Jobseeker allowance of \$550 a week, scheduled to be reduced still further to \$400 in September, while the largest corporations have been given tens of billions of dollars in subsidies since the pandemic began.

The announcement of the “state of disaster” has triggered sweeping police powers, including almost limitless search and seizure provisions. The state government is permitted to suspend or override any law, including any act of parliament. Already, 1,500 Australian Defence Force soldiers are patrolling Victorian streets and roadblocks, with 500 more on standby.

While restrictions are certainly necessary, the central role of the police and the military in the official response is utterly reactionary. In addition to being the product of the gutting of civilian social and medical services, it is part of a broader law-and-order campaign that has centred on escalating government and media efforts to blame and

demonise ordinary people for allegedly being responsible for the surge.

The government assertions, which should be rejected with contempt, are aimed at diverting attention from official responsibility for the catastrophe. They also serve to justify the ever-greater use of police-state measures directed against the emerging struggles of the working class.

Already, the past weeks have seen the start of an upsurge in the class struggle. Educators have demanded the closure of the schools, while meat workers, cleaners and warehouse staff have engaged in stoppages and protests to demand safe conditions.

To take this movement forward definite conclusions must be drawn from the experiences of the past months. All the official parties, including Labor, the Liberal-Nationals and the Greens, have again proven themselves to be the instruments of the corporate and financial elite.

The trade unions, having enforced the destruction of wages and conditions for decades, have taken their collaboration with governments and the corporations to a higher level. Throughout the pandemic, they have enforced wage cuts across the board, backed the massive corporate bailouts and enforced unsafe working conditions.

New organisations of struggle, including independent rank-and-file committees, have to be built by workers at all workplaces. These would be tasked with ensuring that production does not continue under dangerous conditions, and enforcing the precautions required to prevent further coronavirus transmission. They would serve to break the isolation imposed by the unions, uniting broad sections of the working class in a common industrial and political offensive for safety, full-time permanent jobs, wage increases and a major increase in the payments to those left unemployed.

Above all, what is needed is a new political perspective. As the *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Parties have insisted, the working class confronts a war on two inseparable fronts: against the pandemic and against the capitalist profit-system responsible for its expansion.

Developments of the last six months, including in Australia, have proven that public health and the social rights of the population are completely incompatible with a society dominated by the profit interests of a corporate and financial elite.

The only alternative is the fight for a workers’ government and for socialism. The banks and the corporations must be placed under public ownership and democratic workers’ control. Billions must immediately be poured into the healthcare system, with no expense spared in the struggle to defend the lives and the safety of ordinary people. Vast resources must be allocated to end social inequality and the soaring rates of poverty and social distress that have been intensified by the pandemic.

We call on all workers, students and young people seeking a way forward to contact the Socialist Equality Party today.



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