

Australia's rising COVID-19 death toll: A ruling class crime

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Victoria, which remains the epicentre of Australia's coronavirus surge, recorded the highest single tally of COVID-19 deaths yesterday, with 25 fatalities announced. Another 17 lives were lost over the past 24 hours. Medical experts have warned that the death toll will rise further over the coming days, as the virus continues to circulate throughout aged care facilities, especially in the state capital, Melbourne.

Yesterday, the *Age* revealed that the rate of fatalities per infections in Victoria has more than tripled over the past month. In the middle of July, as the current wave of cases escalated, 0.6 percent of the 5,165 Victorian residents who had tested positive for COVID-19 succumbed to the virus. Now, with over 17,000 infections recorded, that figure stands at almost two percent and is continuing to rise.

With this morning's announcement, a total of 351 Victorians have died as a result of the coronavirus, a dramatic increase from fewer than 20 fatalities at the beginning of July.

The rising toll indicates the human tragedy resulting from the surge of coronavirus infections, which is being downplayed and covered-up by the corporate media.

News publications and current affairs programs, which routinely engage in ambulance-chasing "journalism" and feature exploitative and sensationalistic reports of everything from car accidents to individual acts of violence, have remained remarkably silent about the tragic consequences of the COVID-19 deaths for thousands of people.

The muted response serves definite political ends. It dovetails with a tendency in the press to present various government "failures" in isolation and as the result of "bureaucratic bungles," poor decisions on the part of individual officials and policy "errors."

This has been the manner in which the Victorian decision to place low-paid private security guards on the

frontlines of hotel quarantines, the disembarkation of hundreds of infected passengers from the Ruby Princess in New South Wales and the catastrophe in aged-care homes have been presented.

The narrative is aimed at obscuring the fact that hundreds of people have died over the past month as the direct and foreseeable outcome of the program of the entire ruling elite, including state and federal governments and the corporate media, for a premature "reopening of the economy" dictated solely by corporate profit interests.

In Victoria, the state Labor government of Daniel Andrews, in line with the national policy overseen by Prime Minister Scott Morrison, began lifting limited COVID-19 restrictions in May. When Victorian infections started to increase in June, nothing was done to contain the spread. Throughout most of July and into early August, the Andrews government rejected calls from medical experts for workplace and school closures, because of the impact these would have on the bottom line of the largest businesses.

The current "stage four" restrictions, involving the shutdown of most Melbourne retail outlets, schools and some places of employment, were only introduced when the state's hospital system was on the precipice of being overwhelmed.

Over the past days, further evidence has emerged of state and federal government culpability for the catastrophe.

The COVID-19 deaths of a man in his 20s over the weekend, and the earlier fatality of another in his 30s, have further underscored the fraudulent character of claims that young people are largely immune from the worst consequences of the virus. Some 60 percent of deaths, however, have been in aged-care homes.

The widespread fatalities are the consequences of the corporatisation of the sector over the past four decades by federal Labor and Liberal-National governments. All of

the major outbreaks have occurred in privately-owned facilities, staffed by low-paid casual workers and operated solely to extract maximum profits from elderly residents and their families.

It is now clear, though, that the longstanding government responsibility has been supplemented by conscious decisions over the past weeks to allow elderly residents infected with COVID-19 to die.

The Australian Broadcasting Corporation's "Four Corners" program has revealed that urgent appeals from the management of Melbourne's Epping Gardens Aged Care home to federal and state authorities for assistance in maintaining safe staffing levels were rebuffed.

On July 24, management allegedly sent a note to state and federal aged-care authorities, informing them that "Staff is a key issue. We have exhausted all avenues accessing agency and our own people." Staffing levels, set normally at 110, were now "50 down" as a result of infections among workers. Nothing, however, was done to remedy the situation, compounded by delays of up to six days in receiving test results. At least 162 residents and staff have now been infected.

The damning new information has emerged as the *Australian* reported this morning that only \$20 million of a \$43 million federal government package, which was supposed to address the staffing crisis, has been spent.

This follows articles last week, revealing that the Victorian Department of Health and Human Services had been blocking the admission of COVID-19 aged care patients to public hospitals, despite their extreme vulnerability. Instead of receiving expert treatment, many have been heavily sedated, in what amounts to palliative care.

Taken together, the staffing crisis and the denial of hospital admissions have created a catastrophe.

Courageous nurses and staff have begun to blow the whistle. Yesterday, the *Guardian* cited a letter from a staff member at a Melbourne home to Leading Aged Services Australia, the national peak body representing all providers of age services. It declared: "There are NO staff available—we are begging for help with regard to staffing, and no one wants to place themselves in the 'hot zone.' Therefore, it is all up to our depleted staff to help, feed, bathe, medicate and attend to residents who are basically dying."

On Friday, the same publication presented shocking footage of a 95-year-old at Kalyna Care, a private residential home in Melbourne's north-west. It showed ants crawling from an open wound on the leg of the

woman. She passed away days after the video was taken.

The article revealed appalling conditions at the facility: "Care staff brought into the home this week have told *Guardian Australia* that some residents went without food or water for 18 hours. Faeces were found on the floor."

Deaths in aged care will continue, with more than 2,000 active infections across the sector. A further 87 cases have been confirmed in residential centres for the disabled.

Victorian Premier Andrews has confirmed that the "state of disaster" he declared early this month will be extended for an additional four weeks. The announcement underlines the fact that the discussion within ruling circles is when it will be politically possible for them to lift the restrictions to permit further business reopenings. Any strategy aimed at eliminating community transmission of COVID-19 remains off the table, because of the "cost" that it would entail.

The corporate media, which has functioned as the chief promoter of the ruling elite's "back-to-work" campaign, has highlighted the apparent stabilisation of new infections in Victoria, which fell to 222 today, the lowest figure in a month. As has happened previously, they are beginning to agitate for the overturning of the limited restrictions that are responsible for the reduction, thereby creating the conditions for further surges.

There are some 3,500 Victorian infections of unknown origin, moreover, meaning that transmission is likely occurring far more widely than is recorded in the official statistics. Testing rates have fallen sharply. In the week to July 14, more than 191,000 tests were conducted. The figure for the past week is just 138,000, a reduction of more than 25 percent.

Meanwhile, new clusters and hotspots are being reported in the neighbouring state of New South Wales. Transmission remains low, but experts continue to warn of the dangers of a major outbreak.

Sydney bus drivers have threatened to take 48-hour strike action, beginning next Monday, as they demand mandated social distancing and mask wearing on their services. Their stand is the latest indication of growing opposition within the working class to the criminally-negligent official response to the pandemic.



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