

Australian treasurer demands a dangerous “reopening” in Victoria

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Australian Treasurer Josh Frydenberg yesterday ramped-up a campaign for the premature lifting of coronavirus restrictions in Victoria, which has been the epicentre of a major outbreak of COVID-19 over the past two months.

Frydenberg was giving voice to the insistence of the financial elite that lockdown measures be overturned immediately, to create the conditions for a resumption of corporate profit-making, despite the fact that this program will inevitably result in further infections and deaths.

In this, he was continuing the bipartisan position of the federal Liberal-National government, the Labor opposition and state governments that have subordinated public health to the dictates of big business throughout the pandemic.

In a number of media interviews yesterday morning, Frydenberg denounced the Victorian Labor government of Premier Daniel Andrews for having failed to present a “roadmap out” of the present crisis.

“Stage Four” restrictions, introduced at the height of the surge in Victoria early last month, are set to elapse in less than a fortnight.

The financial press is demanding that the policies associated with it, including the cancellation of face-to-face teaching, the closure of much of the retail sector in Melbourne and other limited workplace shutdowns and curtailments, be dispensed with.

This week a major Sydney law firm revealed that it is preparing a class action against the Andrews government, over the impact of the shutdowns on business. Up-market bars and clubs in Melbourne have signalled that they will join, and a number of major corporations are expected to follow.

Businesses, Frydenberg claimed, were being “kept in the dark” by the Andrews government. He invoked new Treasury analysis indicating that the real jobless rate in Victoria is at least 10 percent, with some 30,000 workers losing their employment in July.

Frydenberg complained that the data indicated that 60 percent of those on the government’s JobKeeper wage subsidy, provided to businesses that have stood workers

down, would be in Victoria in the December and March quarters.

The concern of the federal and state governments is not for the social crisis being inflicted on ordinary people. The already inadequate JobKeeper payment is being slashed to \$1,200 per fortnight in October, and then to \$1,000 in January. Frydenberg’s comments are a further warning of the austerity measures that will be contained in the federal budget due to be handed down next month.

At the same time, Frydenberg stated that his focus was on getting people “back to work.” In other words, the mounting hardship will be used to force workers into low-paid, casual employment, including in workplaces where they are imperilled by the virus.

Frydenberg called on Andrews to outline “the number of cases in Victoria that is acceptable to the Victorian government to start reopening the economy.”

Speaking to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, Paul Guerra, the chief executive of the Victorian Chamber of Commerce, was blunter. “We know there’s going to be outbreaks sadly, so how do we deal with that without having to shut down all of industry and, in fact, all of the state?” he asked.

The statements are in line with the policy adopted in April by all federal and state governments, Labor and Liberal-alike, organised in the extra-constitutional National Cabinet that has ruled by decree through most of the pandemic.

The governments rejected expert medical advice calling for a strategy aimed at “eliminating” community transmission of the coronavirus, on the grounds that the measures required would have too great an impact on big business. Instead, they opted for a policy of “suppression.” Schools and workplaces would remain open, as the virus continued to circulate, but the level of infection would be limited by contact-tracing and expanded testing.

It was this program, implemented in Victoria by the Andrews government, with the full support of the federal government and Labor opposition, which resulted in the surge of infections over the past two months and a

catastrophe for tens of thousands.

Throughout July, as daily infection tallies rapidly mounted, Andrews rejected calls from epidemiologists for immediate school and workplace closures. He instituted a series of limited lockdowns that failed to contain the spread. Only in early August, when it was clear that the entire health system was on the precipice of a collapse, were the “Stage Four” measures reluctantly implemented.

The record demonstrates the fraudulent character of any suggestion of a major diversion between Andrews and the federal government. Andrews and Prime Minister Scott Morrison have been at pains, throughout the disaster, to stress their alignment, in keeping with the “national unity” of the political establishment and the ruling elite.

To the extent that frictions have emerged over the past week, they are entirely tactical and are determined by political expediency. Governments are seeking to divert attention from their own responsibility for the crisis and are fearful of mounting popular opposition.

Supporters of the federal government have condemned the Victorian government’s decision to outsource hotel quarantines to private security contractors, whose negligence played a major role in the outbreak. Those who endorse Andrews have pointed to the fact that aged-care, which has been the sector hardest hit, is a federal responsibility.

This is all an exercise in diversion. Far from a series of “policy failings,” the coronavirus surge was the predictable outcome of the program implemented by all governments, Labor and Liberal-National.

Andrews has again underlined the bipartisanship, immediately responding to Frydenberg by pledging to present a “roadmap” for the lifting of restrictions this Sunday, which will be discussed at a National Cabinet meeting on Friday.

Andrews’ “roadmap” will feature the hitherto unknown “traffic light system.” Sectors that are deemed “red” will remain closed, while those that are “orange” will supposedly be subject to “heavy restrictions.” Yellow will indicate some restrictions and businesses assigned a green light will be able to fully reopen with a “COVIDSafe plan.” It remains entirely unclear what the jargon actually means.

A hint was provided by Andrews’ statement that his government would oversee faster temporary closures of workplaces, once infections are detected. In other words, the government is pursuing a policy that it knows will result in the workplace clusters that fuelled the previous outbreak. Nothing has been done, moreover, to address the mass casualisation and job insecurity, that played a major role in the spread because workers were forced to go from one place of temporary employment to another.

Significantly, the “roadmap” is being prepared in secret

consultations between the Labor government and representatives from ten industries. As has been the case throughout the pandemic, the largest businesses, with the backing of the corporatised trade unions, are calling the shots.

The government has also announced that it is planning for a resumption of face-to-face teaching in Term Four, which begins next month. Schools were major centres of infection, with over a hundred of them having been forced to close after the premature return to classroom education in July.

It is clear that the state and federal governments are creating exactly the same conditions that led to the “second wave” of infections in Victoria and elsewhere. As was the case previously, an apparent reduction in case numbers, resulting from lockdown measures, is being exploited to overturn the very policies responsible for the fall in infections.

Daily COVID-19 cases in Victoria have fallen to below 100, for the first time since the outbreak began. Because a substantial proportion of infections were of “unknown origin,” however, it is likely that the virus is spreading more than is captured in the official figures.

Yesterday, a further 41 coronavirus deaths were announced in Victoria. The majority of them were earlier fatalities that had been “reclassified.” This is an indication of the opacity of official information, and the extent to which government announcements must be viewed with significant suspicion.

In any case, the deaths, which are treated as a non-event by the media and political establishment, are a warning to the working class. The criminally-negligent policies that are being pushed by Labor, the Liberal-Nationals and the capitalist ruling class they defend are preparing new tragedies.



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