

Australian governments demand full economic “reopening” by December

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Despite the still-worsening global COVID-19 pandemic, and continuing outbreaks in Australia, the bipartisan “national cabinet” has outlined a plan to almost completely “reopen” the economy within three months.

Worldwide, the number of reported cases is nearing 27 million, with almost 900,000 deaths. This includes more than 26,000 infections and over 750 fatalities in Australia.

Yet, the leaders of the federal, state and territory governments—Liberal-National and Labor Party alike—agreed last Friday to resurrect the “three-step” reopening agenda that was accelerated disastrously in May and June, leading to a deadly second wave of the virus.

This reckless agenda is driven solely by the rapacious demands of big business for the lifting of all restrictions on profit-making, regardless of the concerns and opposition of working class households, particularly those of health and aged care workers, and school teachers, who are on the front line of the “return to work” offensive.

The revived blueprint includes the key industrial state of Victoria, currently the epicentre of the pandemic’s resurgence in Australia, accounting for 675 of the country’s 762 deaths, as of today. Infections are still erupting elsewhere too, particularly in Sydney and Brisbane, where outbreaks are being reported virtually daily in schools.

Victoria’s state Labor Premier Daniel Andrews yesterday announced a parallel reopening “road map,” which includes partially lifting lockdowns as early as next week and herding about 100,000 more workers back into workplaces by September 28.

Andrews was at pains to meet the demands of the corporate elite and keep in sync with the national

cabinet timetable. Like the rest of the political establishment, he spoke in terms of reviving the economy, not concern for working class health and lives.

“I want all of us to stay the course so that we can all have something approaching a normal Christmas,” he said. “I want to get the place open and I want to keep it open, and unless this is done safely and steadily that simply won’t happen.”

Working closely with the trade unions, the state Labor government has already kept major industries substantially open, with limited safety restrictions, during the past five weeks of a “Stage 4” lockdown in Melbourne, the state capital. This includes mining, construction, manufacturing and warehousing.

Now the Labor government intends to start reopening schools and childcare facilities by September 28, risking the lives of teachers and students and their families, in order to push more workers back onto work sites. There will be a “staged” return to face-to-face teaching, starting with the youngest and oldest students, in Melbourne, and an even faster schedule in regional areas of the state.

The Andrews government released Melbourne University modelling showing a 60 percent risk of a third wave lockdown if the economy is reopened before cases are below 25 a day. New cases in the state are still averaging around 70 each day, after exceeding 500 before last month’s lockdown measures.

But the potential delay of some workplace reopenings, such as offices, until November provoked fury in the corporate media and business establishment. One main employer organisation, the Australian Industry Group, predicted “catastrophic economic, health and social damage caused by the continued lockdown.”

Andrews has been accused of pursuing a de facto virus “eradication” strategy rather than the officially-imposed “suppression” plan. “Suppression” is based on allowing the coronavirus to continue to spread, while asserting it can be mostly contained by testing, tracing and quarantining—a claim belied by the ongoing emergence of COVID-19 “hotspots” in the states of New South Wales and Queensland.

The ferocious business criticism highlights the demand of the capitalist class for the subordination of lives to the generation of profits and the accumulation of private wealth. Former Prime Minister Tony Abbott revealed the homicidal logic of this agenda in a speech in London last week. He branded any measures to tackle the spread of COVID-19 as a “health dictatorship” and called for the elderly to be left to die from the virus.

While neither the current Liberal-National leader, Prime Minister Scott Morrison, nor his Labor Party counterparts are stating their calculations so blatantly, this is their outlook as well. Most of Australia’s COVID-19 deaths have occurred in chronically under-funded and under-staffed aged care homes in working class areas, the result of decades of bipartisan indifference.

However, the Andrews government and the union leaders are anxiously seeking to keep suppressing the resistance of workers. That includes the over-worked health and aged care workers who have been forced to care for pandemic victims without adequate masks and other personal protection equipment, and the teachers who eventually forced the closure of schools in June due to the well-proven danger of infections in classrooms and school yards.

Reflecting that nervousness, today’s *Australian Financial Review* editorial denounced the Andrews government’s “aggressive suppression” policy but concluded that “if Victoria follows the road map, the state would be pulled back into line with the national cabinet’s reopening plan by December.”

Likewise, while Morrison echoed the corporate frustration with the “hard and crushing” situation in Victoria, he avoided open criticism of Andrews. Both Morrison and Andrews are carefully retaining the unity of the de facto coalition government established with the formation of the unprecedented “national cabinet” in March.

As it did in May-June, the national cabinet is already lifting restrictions long before any of its three “stages” has had a chance to be assessed. Friday’s announcements featured a “National Agricultural Workers’ Code” to allow backpackers and other low-paid workers to be moved across state borders to pick crops.

Also announced was a “hotspot” definition to require the lifting of state border restrictions when an area records less than 30 cases in three consecutive days. By that rule, border controls would be scrapped across the country, except, for now, for Melbourne residents.

The close partnership between employers and the unions in pushing workers back into unsafe sites was underscored by a joint statement issued by the Victorian Master Builders Association and the Construction Forestry Maritime Mining and Energy Union (CFMMEU). It welcomed the Andrews government’s “vote of confidence in our industry” by shifting its activities from “heavily restricted” to “restricted” on September 28, claiming to be already adhering to such measures.

Last Friday’s national cabinet decisions further demonstrated the sidelining of parliamentary democracy. Federal parliament had just sat for two weeks, after not meeting fully since March. It will not reconvene until the delayed federal budget is handed down on October 6.

The main bill rushed through both houses of parliament last week by Morrison’s government, with Labor’s backing, was to slash the already poverty-line rates of JobKeeper wage subsidies and JobSeeker unemployment benefits from late this month. This reduction is designed to give about five million jobless or “under-employed” workers no choice but to return to workplaces, regardless of the threat to health and lives.



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