

Australian big business, federal government demand accelerated lifting of Melbourne lockdown

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The federal government of Prime Minister Scott Morrison, together with numerous corporate lobby groups and sections of the corporate media, has denounced the Victorian state government's proposed "roadmap" out of coronavirus lockdown measures. The anti-lockdown campaign is aimed at accelerating the ruling elite's homicidal reopening of the economy, with more widespread COVID-19 infections and deaths accepted as the price to be paid for the generation of higher levels of corporate profit.

On Sunday, Victoria state Labor Premier Daniel Andrews announced an extension until September 28 of only slightly modified "stage four" lockdown measures in Melbourne. These have included a night-time curfew, mandatory mask wearing, a 5-kilometre restriction on people's movements from their homes, a maximum of one hour outdoors exercise, a ban on visiting other people's homes except for caregiving, and restrictions on certain economic activities, including an effective suspension of the retail, hospitality, and some service industries.

These measures were put in place in response to the "second wave" spike of coronavirus infections, which reached a daily peak in Victoria of 725 cases on August 5, threatening the outright collapse of the hospital and healthcare system.

Under the announced "roadmap," the alleviation of the "stage four" measures from September 28 is based on the state recording a daily average of between 30 and 50 new cases (the average is now 85 but is steadily declining).

On October 12, the state government is forcing a resumption of face to face classroom schooling for students in Melbourne in Years Prep, 1 and 2, as well as Years 11 and 12 and for Year 10s studying senior subjects. On the same date schools in regional Victoria will reopen for all students. These measures will endanger the safety of hundreds of thousands of school students and countless teachers and school staff.

Another step is scheduled for October 26, if there are

fewer than five daily average cases over the previous fortnight, with the curfew ended, restrictions on people leaving their homes lifted, a possible "staged return" of face to face school teaching for all year levels, and the lifting of restrictions on construction, hospitality, retail, tourism, and some other sectors.

An additional step in the "roadmap" is scheduled for November 23, conditional on no new coronavirus cases in the state being recorded over a fortnight, involving permitting larger crowds and social gatherings as well as looser restrictions on other economic activity, including the reopening of indoor entertainment venues and pubs. The lifting of all restrictions, labelled by the government a "COVID normal" situation, is dependent on no new infections in the state for 28 days.

The federal government immediately denounced these plans, signalling an end to the bipartisan unity between the Labor and Liberal parties on pandemic policy.

In a joint statement issued on Sunday, Morrison, Treasurer Josh Frydenberg, and Health Minister Greg Hunt declared that Andrews' proposals amounted to "crushing news for the people of Victoria." Emphasising that the "roadmap" was "a Victorian government plan," the federal government leaders complained that "the continued restrictions will have further impact on the Victorian and national economy."

The prime minister followed up this statement with a press conference yesterday to reiterate the "crushing news" soundbite several times, and to refuse to commit any additional economic support to people affected by the extended lockdown measures. Morrison signalled his support for a corporate-led campaign against the "roadmap," declaring that he regarded the Victorian government plan as both a "worst-case scenario" and "a starting point in terms of how this issue will be managed in the weeks and months ahead."

In a thinly-veiled threat, he pledged to deliver "constructive feedback to the Victorian government" after

“sitting down with industry [and] business.”

Corporate lobby groups and the media, led by the Murdoch and financial press, are whipping up a frenzied campaign against the Andrews government. They regard as intolerable any extension of the restrictions placed on the corporate extraction of surplus value from the working class. This is in line with the “back to work” campaign being promoted by the ruling elite internationally, accompanied by the promotion of homicidal “herd immunity” ideas.

Paul Guerra, head of the Victorian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, responded to the state government’s “roadmap” by issuing the extraordinary demand that profit interests be openly prioritised ahead of public health. “Business needs to be heard,” he declared, “and that’s the part that we’ve been disappointed about, is [that] health measures have taken priority.”

The media has echoed such statements. In a characteristically lurid piece, the Murdoch-owned *Australian* newspaper today compared the lockdown measures in Melbourne to police-state repression under Stalinist rule in Poland. The outlet’s sudden discovery of the importance of civil liberties stands in stark contrast to its record of cheerleading every piece of antidemocratic legislation adopted under the guise of the so-called war on terror.

The *Australian Financial Review*’s editorial today hailed various corporate figures for “rais[ing] the alarm against this public health cult of elimination [of coronavirus].”

The Victorian state government has attempted to win public support by posturing as a champion of public health. Andrews declared on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s “7.30” program yesterday, “politics has never mattered less to me.... Leadership is not [about] doing what’s popular, it is about doing what’s right.”

This bogus public relations “spin” belies the reality that the Labor Party represents the interests of big business and finance capital no less ruthlessly than does the Liberal Party. Only tactical differences now separate the preferred policies of the two chief political instruments of the ruling class.

Andrews has repeatedly emphasised his determination to open up the economy on behalf of the corporations as quickly as possible—but he has calculated that doing so amid mass coronavirus infections and deaths is not feasible. He has been publicly backed by some important business figures, including Australia’s wealthiest individual, Anthony Pratt of Visy Industries (personal fortune, \$15 billion).

Andrews, who served as health minister (2007-2010) under the previous state Labor government before becoming premier in 2014, is acutely aware of the fragility of the chronically under-resourced and largely privatised Victorian healthcare system. Any sustained surge in coronavirus would likely trigger a catastrophic breakdown, even worse

than that seen in New York and northern Italy during the initial stages of the global pandemic.

“When it comes to public health infrastructure and resources per head of population, Victoria is much worse off than any other state in Australia,” leading infectious disease expert Raina MacIntyre of the University of New South Wales’ Kirby Institute explained on the ABC. “Victoria is just a shell of a system, it’s just been decimated, and that’s fine in the good times, you can get by on a minimal model, but when there’s a pandemic all those weaknesses are exposed.”

The state Labor government is culpable for the coronavirus disaster that has hit Victoria. In April, Andrews joined every other state premier and the prime minister in rejecting a strategy aimed at eliminating coronavirus infections, instead agreeing to permit a supposedly “safe” level of continued COVID-19 infection, on the explicit basis of preventing businesses from incurring excessive costs. The premature lifting in May of the lockdown measures imposed during the “first wave” triggered an entirely predictable resurgence of coronavirus cases.

Andrews and the state Labor government are conscious of provoking working class opposition in the event that another rushed reopening of the economy leads to spikes in infections across different industries and workplaces. Social tensions are escalating as unemployment is rising to depression-level rates.

Amid the crisis, and the eruption of internecine fighting within the political establishment, the critical task confronting the working class is to develop an independent struggle in defence of its interests. Workers, both employed and unemployed, should form rank and file workplace and community safety committees, organising resistance, including strike measures, against unsafe conditions. This requires a political struggle against both the federal Liberal-National government and the state Labor government in Victoria, and the development of the fight for a workers’ government and socialist policies that will ensure the economic, social, and healthcare safety of all working people.



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