

Australian ruling elite moves to junk coronavirus safety measures—the working class must intervene to answer the pandemic threat!

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A critical turning point has been reached in the coronavirus pandemic crisis in Australia. Powerful sections of the ruling class have concluded that any further lockdown measures and related safety restrictions can no longer be tolerated and that big business and finance capital must be allowed free rein.

A full-throated government, business and media campaign is underway to eliminate the limited and inadequate restrictions put in place by state governments, and fully reopen the economy by forcing more workers back into their workplaces, regardless of the dangers presented by continuing community transmission and the worsening resurgence of COVID-19 globally.

This turn erupted in response to the announcement on September 2 that the Australian economy has entered the worst recession since the 1930s Great Depression. The 7 percent June quarter contraction of the economy is the precursor of far worse to come. It does not include the impact of the Victorian state “lockdown” nor the winding back of the JobKeeper and Jobseeker payments on September 28, which will see unemployment, poverty levels and class tensions soar. Moratoriums on evictions and rent relief are due to be lifted by the end of the year, as will the ability of companies to trade while insolvent.

Multi-billion-dollar subsidies for business helped boost corporate profits by 15 percent in the three months to June 30, while total wages were cut by 2.5 percent. Not every section of corporate Australia, however, has benefited from the crisis. The financial press recently reported the case of billionaire Solomon Lew, who has lost more than \$80 million on his investment in retail giant Myer.

The unanimity of the “National Cabinet” has been somewhat undermined in the face of this burgeoning economic crisis. Made up of Prime Minister Scott Morrison and the state and territory government leaders, both Liberal-National and Labor, and backed by the union leaders, this unconstitutional body has all but sidelined parliament since March.

After claiming to have “flattened” the first wave of coronavirus infections in Australia, and having bailed out the corporate elite, the National Cabinet agreed to a premature and dangerous lifting of the initial restrictions in May. These had been strictly limited, with manufacturing, construction, retail and other industries continuing as normal. New measures were only put in place in Melbourne after infections spiked, signalling a second wave, and threatening to trigger the collapse of Victoria’s grossly underfunded healthcare system. From July 8, “stage three” restrictions were imposed. After these proved ineffective in stemming the spread of infection, a “stage four” lockdown and “state of disaster” was declared on August 2.

The political establishment’s show of unanimity was initially maintained during the “second wave.” Morrison declared: “We’re all Victorians now.” Such rhetoric is no longer being heard. Sharp tactical divisions have erupted to the surface of political life.

The Victorian Labor government announced on September 6 its “roadmap” out of pandemic restrictions, but was denounced by Morrison and corporate lobby groups for not moving more quickly. A central aspect of the campaign involves opposition to the only partial reopening of the state’s schools, with Years Prep-2 and 11-12 due to resume classroom learning in Term 4, but other grades staying online, potentially forcing many workers with children to remain away from their places of employment. All other states’ education systems have reopened entirely.

One business chief openly complained that “health measures have taken priority.” Morrison described the “roadmap” plan as “crushing news.” The media, led by the Murdoch and financial press, have played a spearhead role—an editorial in the *Australian Financial Review* denounced the “public health cult of elimination [of coronavirus].”

Last week, Morrison, in a calculated provocation, exploited the case of a woman from Canberra who was unable to attend her father’s funeral in Queensland due to coronavirus border restrictions, to push for the lifting of limitations on travel from state to state. The episode confirmed that the campaign for a faster elimination of restrictions in Victoria was only part of the wider agenda of dispensing with every remaining hindrance to big business operations across the country.

These rifts were triggered by the unprecedented economic and social crisis that has emerged.

The corporate and political elite has concluded that the working class must be made to pay for the crisis. The extraction of the necessary surplus value from workers’ labour power requires the end of coronavirus restrictions.

This goes in tandem with the refashioning of class relations through mass sackings and the further evisceration of working conditions, pay rates and standardised hours, to be enforced by the trade union bureaucracy.

Having already helped axe jobs, penalty rates and other conditions at the outset of the pandemic, the unions have been collaborating for months with the government and employers in five “working groups” on industrial relations and other pro-business measures.

Former Prime Minister Tony Abbott spelled out the logic of this class war agenda, in a September 1 speech.

Abbott denounced lockdown measures as representing “health dictatorships,” condemned attempts “to preserve almost every life at almost any cost,” and suggested older people with coronavirus could be

left to die instead of receiving healthcare. He echoed US President Donald Trump's refrain that "the cure cannot be worse than the disease."

Build independent rank-and-file committees!

In the fight against this homicidal agenda, the working class confronts a political struggle against the entire ruling elite.

The Labor Party is an instrument of big business and is no less responsible than the Liberal-National parties for the disaster that has emerged. State and territory Labor governments have sought to adopt only the most limited coronavirus safety measures. Last May, along with their Coalition counterparts, they rushed to junk these even as community transmission continued. Throughout the pandemic, there has been no mobilisation of the necessary social resources. Health and aged care workers still lack proper personal protective equipment (PPE), COVID-19 testing remains limited, and contact tracing inadequate.

To the extent that the Victorian Labor government has not yet fallen entirely in line with demands to immediately lift lockdowns, and governments in Western Australia, Queensland, South Australia and Tasmania have retained border restrictions, they are motivated by two concerns within sections of the ruling class itself. Firstly, calculations that business interests are best served by first lowering rates of community transmission, then opening up the economy, and secondly, intense fears of triggering opposition from the working class.

The "state of disaster" declaration in Victoria showed the state government's concern over increasingly frequent workers' protests after infections in their workplaces. There were multiple strikes in July and early August, including in warehouses, the Spotless commercial laundry and JBS Swift meatworks. The government was also evidently alarmed at the ferment among teachers and education staff, as dozens of schools were forced to close following reported outbreaks.

The situation confronting the working class has only become even more severe.

Unemployment and "under-employment" are predicted to exceed 20 percent by year's end, with young and casualised workers suffering the most. The cuts to the meagre income supports provided to working class households since the crisis erupted in March are aimed at giving workers no choice but to return to unsafe workplaces.

The ruling elite's campaign to eliminate all coronavirus restrictions has capitalised on the grossly inadequate health and welfare support systems implemented by the Victorian authorities. People have been left to fend for themselves during the lockdown, with no genuine mental health services provided, nor proper assistance for other vulnerable people struggling to cope.

The lockdown has been accompanied by an 8 p.m.–6 a.m. curfew on Melbourne and heavy-handed police measures against working people, following on from the July–August "hard lockdown" of public housing residents in high-rise towers.

Given a free hand by the Labor government, police violence has escalated, including against small anti-lockdown demonstrations organised by the extreme right-wing and disoriented social layers being whipped up by the media campaign against the coronavirus restrictions.

State governments have banned protests against the police murder of George Floyd in the US and police violence in Australia, and levied large fines on people just for leaving their homes.

The experience through which the working class in Australia is passing is an international one. Governments in every country have responded to the threat of the pandemic from the standpoint of protecting profits, not lives. The health crisis has revealed the inability of capitalism to respond

in the interests of society as a whole.

This underscores the necessity for the working class to take action independently of, and in opposition to, the trade unions. Workers, both employed and unemployed, should form rank-and-file workplace and community safety committees to organise resistance, including strike actions, against unsafe conditions and in defence of jobs, wages and conditions. These committees should fight for the necessary society-wide pandemic safety measures, as indicated by epidemiologists, medical scientists and other experts, guided by the central consideration of preventing harm to health and loss of life.

Workers, youth and students, small business operators and other ordinary people affected by lockdowns or other restrictions aimed at bringing the pandemic under control must receive full income compensation. Enormous resources must be poured into the public health and education systems, with privatisation measures reversed. Health workers must be protected with proper provision of PPE, free mental health services must be available to everyone who needs them, schools must remain closed in areas where there is coronavirus community transmission, and all students must be provided with free, high-speed internet and computer facilities to allow equitable online learning.

All workplaces within socially necessary industries must be operated with the fullest precautions. Every vulnerable member of society—including the elderly, disabled, refugees, and others—must be freely provided with the necessary social supports.

These essential measures can be financed through the expropriation of the banks and major corporations and the redistribution of wealth away from the financial oligarchy, along with the \$575 billion allocated for wars and military preparations over the next decade. The billionaires continue to expand their fortunes amid the pandemic crisis—by June, Australia's richest 20 people had increased their wealth by 32 percent, to a total of \$189 billion, since last year. The collective fortunes of this roomful of people far exceed the entire federal budget for health and education in 2019–20, \$118 billion.

The working class, the vast majority of the population, has to advance its own revolutionary solution to the pandemic crisis. The formation of rank-and-file workplace and neighbourhood committees must develop through a struggle against the entire political establishment, including Labor and the Greens, directed towards the establishment of a workers' government to implement socialist policies.

Only the Socialist Equality Party, along with our sister parties in the International Committee of the Fourth International, fights for this perspective. We urge all workers and youth to join our movement in order to end the moribund capitalist system.



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