Australia: Victorian government accelerates lifting of COVID-19 restrictions to satisfy big business

Mike Head
28 September 2020

Anxious to meet the needs of the corporate elite, the Victorian state Labor government yesterday began lifting coronavirus safety measures faster than previously proposed.

Not only were partial industrial restrictions and primary school closures ended more quickly than planned. Future dates for lifting most of the remaining precautions were cast aside, so that reopenings will occur more quickly, within weeks, if COVID-19 case numbers decline.

Premier Daniel Andrews explicitly couched the acceleration in terms of the number of employees who will return to industrial workplaces, thus falling further into line with the "return to work" campaign mounted for weeks by big business, the media and the federal Liberal-National government.

Many restrictions will remain on households, but worksites, schools, childcare centres and universities will be reopened more quickly in order to get workers fully back into factories, warehouses and construction sites.

The contrast is revealing. Workplaces, which Andrews previously admitted accounted for 80 percent of infections since May, will reopen faster than family visits will be allowed. Labor's repressive 9 p.m. to 5 a.m. curfew—which had no public health justification—will be lifted, but new $5,000 fines will apply to breaching rules on public gatherings.

Risky workplaces are involved. From today, in the capital Melbourne, workforce capacity will go up to 80 percent for meat processing, 90 percent for poultry processing and 80 percent for seafood processing. All staffing limits will be lifted for warehouses and supermarkets.

This profit-driven rush to reopen workplaces raises the danger of another disastrous infection wave, adding to the nearly 800 deaths that have resulted in Victoria from the last accelerated lifting of safety measures nationally in May–June.

With primary schools told to return to face-to-face teaching by October 12, school teachers and students will be placed on the front line of this danger, along with the health and aged care workers and nursing home residents who have already paid the heaviest price for the pandemic in Australia, as they have internationally.

Around the world, the pandemic is worsening. The premature lifting of workplace restrictions is leading to record daily confirmed cases, such as 16,000 in France on Thursday, 6,600 in Britain and more than 1,000 in New York on Saturday as the US death toll from the virus passed 200,000. Globally, the "return to work" drive has taken the death toll to one million.

Lockdowns, although limited, have helped reduce Australia's confirmed infections since a peak of over 700 new cases daily in June, but community transmission is still occurring, as are deaths. There were 24 new cases nationally yesterday, with 16 in Victoria and 7 in Western Australia. The WA cases came from a visiting cargo ship, highlighting the impossibility of walling the country off from the pandemic.

While welcoming yesterday's Victorian announcements as a first step, business leaders and the federal government of Prime Minister Scott Morrison are demanding an even faster ending of workplace restrictions. Despite opinion polls in Victoria and nationally showing strong support for continued lockdown precautions, they seized on Andrews' announcement to ramp up the pressure for a rapid full economic re-opening.

"Easing restrictions in Victoria in a COVID-safe way is vitally important so that more Victorians can get back to work and resume their normal lives," Morrison said in a joint media statement yesterday with Treasurer Josh Frydenberg and Health Minister Greg Hunt. "Today's announcement is a small but important step in that direction."

For all the empty references to "COVID-safe," this means prioritising corporate profits over human health and lives. In a typical expression of this offensive, Australian Retailers

© World Socialist Web Site

Association chief executive Paul Zahra criticised Victoria's new schedule as too slow.

Zahra said he was "deeply concerned" non-essential retail would remain closed until at least mid-October. "That is simply too close to Christmas trading to allow viable retail activity," he said.

Echoing such demands, Andrews said his government would take its next step toward lifting restrictions as early as October 19, with an aim for a "COVID-normal Christmas."

Andrews emphasised that 127,000 workers would immediately return to various worksites, including building projects, meatworks, supermarkets, food distribution, food processing, manufacturing and some solo outdoor employees—about 30,000 more than initially planned.

To facilitate this process, primary school students would return to schools from October 12, earlier than previously proposed, as well as prep to grade 2, special and final-year students, and childcare centres could open for all children.

Yet, according to a summary provided by Andrews, modelling has indicated that opening workplaces too soon would be "dangerous." He said: "The Burnet Institute found that opening up too quickly would result in a 41 percent chance of a third wave within four weeks."

Regarding schools, the government claimed to be acting on new findings from the Murdoch Children's Research Institute that children aged under 10 were less infectious than older children. Reportedly, the research found that when young children had been infected and gone to school, outbreaks were "very uncommon."

More than 150 schools in Victoria have had to shut at some point this year due to a positive case, and at least 373 students and 139 staff have been infected with COVID-19. But Andrews said the study concluded that schools were more likely to be a multiplier of existing community transmission rather than a driver of the epidemic.

Even on that basis, teachers and other school workers, as well as students and their families, are to be exposed to great risks. Returning all primary students to classrooms was "unlikely to change the trajectory of case numbers significantly by Christmas," the Murdoch Institute report said, but there were dangers arising from household transmission and increased movement, including by adults during pick-up and drop-off.

The government is counting on the education trade unions to suppress the opposition of educators that eventually forced the closure of schools in June. On its Facebook page, the Australian Education Union (AEU), which covers school staff, told its members yesterday: "We are continuing discussions with DET [Department of Education] around the details and will be in touch with members with more information soon."

In reality the union is working closely with the government to stifle resistance. AEU Victorian branch president Meredith Peace told the media that the October 12 return was a positive sign the education system was slowly returning to normal.

Premier Andrews cleared the political deck for yesterday's acceleration announcement by forcing the resignation of the state's health minister, Jenny Mikakos. Last Friday, he publicly blamed her for the use of untrained and ill-equipped private security guards at hotel quarantine sites for returning overseas travellers.

Mikakos was made the scapegoat for the catastrophic failures of the Andrews and Morrison governments to provide adequate personal protection equipment (PPE) and staff in hospitals and nursing homes, mass testing, contact tracing and quarantine facilities.

In their joint statement yesterday, the three federal ministers centrally responsible for the premature reopening of the economy in June—Morrison, Frydenberg and Hunt—professed to be "deeply concerned" for the mental health of Victorians due to the length of the state's lockdown.

They then alluded to their actual concern. They said the federal government had already paid more than $27 billion to Victorians throughout the pandemic and expected to pay out an additional $16.8 billion in the December and March quarters.

This same government began slashing these JobKeeper wage subsidies and JobSeeker unemployment payments last Friday, seeking to give destitute workers no choice but to accept unsafe conditions and lower wages as part of the financial elite's "return to work" offensive.

This concerted drive to reopen all workplaces amid the global pandemic and the most serious economic and social breakdown since the 1930s Great Depression will trigger critical class struggles, posing the necessity for the working class to take control of society and reorganise it totally along socialist lines.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site