

# Australian citizens stranded by COVID-19 measures denounce Morrison government

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12 October 2020

While the Australian government has slightly increased the number of stranded citizens allowed to return home, it has done little to assist those trapped overseas by COVID-19 measures.

Currently, some 24,000 people have registered their intention of returning, but according to the Board of Airline Representatives of Australia (BARA), the real number is over 100,000. They confront extortionate airline ticket prices, months-long delays and a lack of government support.

Last month, Prime Minister Scott Morrison announced that international arrival restrictions would be gradually lifted from 4,000 a week, introduced in mid-July, to 6,000 per week by October 12. Canberra, however, has refused to provide any substantial aid or support.

The *World Socialist Web Site* recently spoke to some of the stranded Australians.

**Ian Giles**, a casual fly-in, fly-out mine worker, has been stuck in Thailand after a 12-day holiday in March. He explained that he had eight flight cancellations between March and September and rejected airline claims that the ticket price gouging was solely a result of caps on international arrivals imposed by the Australian government.

“The airlines started putting the prices up way before the government put the caps on in July. They started ratcheting up their prices on the day we were told to come home by our government, on March 16.

“In the first week of April, flights from Patong to Australia were like \$5,000 plus—this was the cheapest option. Some of the prices went from \$500 to \$800 to \$8,000, and even \$10,000 and beyond, at least a tenfold increase,” he said.

“What’s worse, the Australian government hasn’t provided repatriation flights from Thailand. Even Colombia organised flights to pick up their citizens stranded in Thailand.”

Giles explained the difficulties of getting a flight ticket refund. “In July I booked a more expensive flight with Cathay Pacific, which the [Australian] embassy website advised me to do. Cathay Pacific cancelled my flights four

times: for a July 22 booking, then July 28, then in August, and again at the start of September. It’s now reporting that they have no flights until January. They were supposed to give me a refund but I am still waiting for it.”

Giles said one woman he had spoken to on Facebook had paid for return tickets for her family of four on Cathay Pacific, but the flight was cancelled. The tickets, however, were organised through Flexi-saver, he said, which meant she was not entitled to any refund.

The casual mine worker explained that he depended on financial assistance from family and friends who were providing him with about \$200 a week. “I had to do this because I’m not eligible for financial support from Australia because I’m in Thailand and I’m not eligible to work here because I’m on a tourist visa.

“I had to call the [Australian] embassy here several times over the past few months trying to state my case and get some financial support but all they advised was to ask family and friends. I’m getting really bad on money,” he said.

“We’re allowed to get a \$2,000 loan from DFAT [the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade], which isn’t much. When I got it, by the time I’d paid my outstanding electricity bills and an extension on my visa, shopping and paid my negative \$300 bank balance, all I had left after three days was \$800. The amount of loan money [DFAT] has for a flight back in my region is \$750. It says it has booked me a flight for November 1.”

Giles said he had attempted to contact Channel Seven, Channel Nine and “A Current Affair” to share his story. “I haven’t heard back from any of them,” he said. “If you give them the hard, true facts, it’s too much for them. It cuts across their interests. What’s easier is for them to forget about us.”

**Sandi James**, a qualified psychologist and schoolteacher, is one of the estimated 30,000 Australians stranded in the UK after travelling there for a job-related conference. She was due to fly into Malaysia in late March to start work at a university.

James said she had booked a ticket in April to return to her

family in Australia in July on the first available flight, but the booking was cancelled, as was the next one.

“I had to pay an extra \$1,000 on top of the original ticket price of \$1,500. The second flight was another \$1,000. I couldn’t afford to book a flight to Australia now because they’re asking for around \$5,000 and the chance of getting on a flight is minimal anyway. I don’t have the \$5k, so I’m just stuck here.

“I, like thousands of others, have been bumped from flights and the airlines have offered credits but no refunds. Lots of people here are still waiting for refunds, some from multiple different flights and airlines. I’ve heard of instances where a family was asked to pay somewhere between \$40,000 and \$50,000 to get a flight home.”

James has done some part-time tele-health work while in the UK. “Every Australian dollar is worth like 50 pence here. What’s made it harder is that I have to support my partner, who is currently unemployed and stranded in Thailand, so I am trying to support the both of us.

“I am currently staying at a backpacker’s hostel. Before this I stayed with a friend, who I now owe quite a lot of money. Prior to this I was couch-surfing in London and with other acquaintances in the UK. I was told by the Australian High Commission in London to find a homeless shelter. No other assistance was offered.”

James said being trapped in the UK was impacting her health. “I’ve lost a lot of weight—about 14–15 kilograms from the stress—and had to get support from the NHS mental health service in the UK. I was quite suicidal for a while there. There’s going to be a spike in post-traumatic stress coming out of all of this.

“I’ve been anxious, constantly asking myself questions like, ‘Will I have a roof over my head? Do I have enough money? Am I ever going to be able to get home? Will I ever find a job or any kind of employment? Or is my career completely screwed? Am I ever going to see my partner or my family again?’”

**Gary MacAdam**, who is currently in Subic Bay in the Philippines with his girlfriend, has been involved in fly-in, fly-out construction and mining work for almost ten years.

“When COVID-19 started making itself felt there didn’t seem to be any urgency at first but then the Australian government said on March 16 that we were all advised to go back to Australia. By March 18 they had already locked down some of the areas around where I live. This made it very difficult to get a flight and get to Manila airport because I was given only two days’ notice to prepare for such a move.

“In late July, I booked a flight with Royal Brunei to Australia due to leave on September 9th but the airfares were more than double the normal price. Ten days later, I

was told the flight had been cancelled. I asked if I could be transferred to one of the three flights scheduled for that week but they said no. They asked if I wanted to defer my ticket for up to 12 months or get a credit or a full refund but the refund would take eight to ten weeks.”

Commenting on the airline industry, MacAdam said, “Every time I looked up a flight, the airlines said that they were still taking bookings. I actually don’t think they had any intention of honouring these flights.

“The government and the media are saying there’s something like 25,000 expats overseas. That’s a joke, there are hundreds of thousands and it’s not just Australians either, people around the world are stranded, including in Australia. Lots of international students in Australia are in desperate straits, especially because casual jobs in industries like hospitality and the ‘gig economy’ have all been decimated.”

“I identify as a socialist,” MacAdam added, “This whole situation has exposed capitalist policies for what they are. There is absolutely no safety net in the event of a catastrophe like this.

“From the beginning the ruling elite’s primary concern was not to cause a panic and give them time to get out of their positions on the stock market before it fell into a screaming heap. They were all shorting because they knew it was going to take a dive.

“A few people have benefitted from this and made billions but all those marginalised, working- and middle-class people, who have no control over anything, have been absolutely screwed.”

MacAdam concluded: “The rich are having no trouble circumnavigating the globe because they can still travel first class. It’s no big deal to them. Everyone who flies economy class is stuck and with no chance of getting in.”



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