

Australian corporate elite demands lifting of all coronavirus safety restrictions

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A campaign by the financial elite for the immediate overturning of all coronavirus safety restrictions has reached a fever pitch, with business chiefs, corporate lobby groups and senior state and federal politicians insisting that any measures to contain COVID-19 and prevent further outbreaks are an unacceptable impost on profit-making operations.

The focus of this offensive is the state of Victoria, where a “second wave” of infections resulted in hundreds of deaths and thousands of cases in July and August. But it is a national push that finds expression in all states and territories.

The campaign is one prong of the ruling class response to the economic crisis accelerated by the pandemic. It dovetails with the federal budget that was brought down by the Liberal-National government earlier this month, the main measures of which were rushed through parliament within days thanks to the support of the Labor opposition.

The budget, which features what the *Australian Financial Review* described as a “tsunami of money” to corporations and the wealthiest individuals, is explicitly premised on forcing all workers to return to their places of employment regardless of the dangers of coronavirus infection. The worst mass unemployment in decades is to be used to bludgeon ordinary people into low-paid and precarious casual and contract labour.

Governments and big business are insisting that this must occur prior to the holiday season, that begins with Christmas, to ensure maximum returns for business.

The Victorian state Labor government has yet again signalled its backing for this bipartisan agenda. Its Premier Daniel Andrews has indicated that he will present an acceleration of the “roadmap” out of Stage Four lockdown measures, which were imposed in August when Melbourne’s hospital system was threatened with collapse as a result of high infection numbers, as early as this weekend. Andrews has particularly flagged a possible easing of trading restrictions on hospitality and retail outlets.

But the message from the ruling elite is that the plans,

under which restrictions on indoor seating and the number of individuals inside establishments would likely remain, is not enough. The corporate elite and the federal government responded to Andrews’ announcement last weekend of an initial easing of Stage Four measures with undisguised fury.

The changes Andrews outlined included the end of a night time curfew in Melbourne by the end of the month, the removal of restrictions on how long residents can leave their homes to exercise and socialise, and an extension of the radius within which they can do their shopping and other activities from five to twenty-five kilometres.

In response, executives at seven of the country’s largest corporations issued an open letter, demanding a speedy reopening. “We urge you now, in light of the excellent recent progress, to permit the careful and staged return to the workplace of office workers and the small businesses that provide services to them,” they insisted.

The signatories were BHP CEO Mike Henry, Commonwealth Bank head Matt Comyn, Coca Cola Amatil chief Alison Watkins, Incitec Pivot chief Jeanne Johns, Newcrest chief Sandeep Biswas, Orica chief Alberto Calderon and Wesfarmers CEO Rob Scott.

They were joined by federal Treasurer Josh Frydenberg, who hysterically denounced the Andrews government in media appearances early this week. The Andrews government, he declared, was showing a “callous” indifference to the plight of small businesses and laid-off workers.

“It’s fine to lift the travel restrictions to 25 kilometres but if the businesses aren’t open people haven’t got anywhere to go,” Frydenberg stated. He asserted that almost all restrictions should have been lifted over the weekend.

The federal government and the corporate media are inciting far-right elements and small businesses to defy the restrictions that remain in place, with increasingly unhinged rhetoric.

Late last week, Channel Seven’s “Sunrise” breakfast program featured an interview with a Melbourne retailer, who was opening his store each day, in disregard of

coronavirus safety measures. One of the hosts declared that the man, who acknowledged he was breaking the law, was an “Australian hero.” This morning, the Murdoch-owned *Australian* newspaper published an opinion piece bemoaning the fact that “whether its climate change or the coronavirus, we are invariably exhorted to ‘listen to the science.’”

The tabloids in Melbourne are also heavily promoting an online campaign to “free Melbourne.” It consists of a motley collection of minor celebrities, including the wives of retired football players, comedians and little-known actors, posting social media photos of themselves donning “free Melbourne” shirts from their plush homes and mansions, in a demand for the overturning of all coronavirus restrictions.

To the extent that the Andrews government has not moved more rapidly, it is because the government knows that all of the conditions for a further COVID-19 resurgence are in place. This, Andrews fears, could have disastrous political consequences for his own government and would inflame anger among workers and young people.

Already, however, measures on paper are being flouted with the support of the government. This Saturday, the lucrative Cox Plate horse race is proceeding in Melbourne, in an event that will bring together 750 jockeys, journalists and racing staff from across the state. The Andrews government had initially allowed an attendance of more than 1,000, including race horse owners, but retreated in the face of a public backlash.

As has happened throughout the pandemic, governments are invoking a decline in case numbers, to overturn the very measures responsible for the decline in transmission. While daily infections in Melbourne and Victoria have declined to the single-digits as a result of the Stage Four measures, the dangers have been revealed by infections at two schools in Melbourne’s north, which have sent hundreds of students, teachers and parents into social isolation, and another in a social housing apartment tower in the impoverished suburb of Broadmeadows.

Epidemiologists, moreover, have warned that undetected community transmission is likely continuing, while doctors have stated that the chronically-underfunded healthcare system remains as vulnerable to further outbreaks as it was several months ago. Well over a thousand infections were recorded among health workers during the last “wave” of the virus, with nurses and doctors denied adequate personal protective equipment.

Dr Michelle Ananda-Rajah, who is conducting a survey of Victorian health workers, told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation earlier this week: “We’re still seeing outbreaks among healthcare workers in hospitals even with very, very low community transmission, and that is a red flag. I don’t think that hospitals are optimised for safety, and this is a real

threat to our recovery as we start to open up.”

Others have noted that the government has not provided any tangible evidence of an improvement in contact-tracing procedures, which completely broke down when Melbourne’s infections reached their peak in August.

The rush to lift restrictions is not confined to Melbourne. In New South Wales, where most safety measures have already been lifted, the state Liberal government is preparing a further easing. It will include allowances for religious services to be attended by 300 people, outdoor concerts with 500 people, and fewer restrictions on gyms.

Under conditions in which new cases are still being detected each day, these measures clearly pose the risk of widespread transmission. Meanwhile, the government continues to invoke a twenty-person limit on other outdoor gatherings, to ban all political protests, even though they pose far less of a risk of contagion.

The state Labor government in Queensland has come under fire for its maintenance of border cross restrictions. But as is the case elsewhere, there are a myriad of exceptions when it comes to corporate operations. This weekend, the Queensland state capital will host the Australian Rules Football grand final, with 30,000 spectators, including corporates and “media personalities” from across the country.

The rush to overturn all safety restrictions is based on the same considerations that have resulted in a resurgence of the pandemic across Europe and internationally. For governments, Labor and Liberal-National alike, all measures based on public health and science must be dispensed with, to ensure the fortunes of the financial aristocracy and the largest corporations.



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