

Australian ruling elite again demands premature lifting of pandemic restrictions

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Despite the intensifying global pandemic, agitation by Australian big business, media empires and the political establishment for a full lifting of all restrictions reached a new crescendo this week, following the Victorian state Labor government's moves to substantially lift its three-month partial lockdown.

The fury, driven directly by corporate profit interests, further intensified yesterday, after the state Labor governments in Queensland and Western Australia announced only limited removals of their border controls, largely keeping out residents of the two most infected cities, Melbourne and Sydney.

Qantas CEO Alan Joyce declared the Queensland border decision “ridiculous,” and threatened to cancel thousands of planned flights into the state. Village Roadshow Theme Parks, based on Queensland's Gold Coast, was the crudest in asserting its money-making concerns. Chief operating officer Bikash Randhawa said the “entire arrangement is bullshit.”

A similar lifting of safety measures caused the catastrophes now engulfing hospitals throughout Europe, the United States and many other parts of the world, where the toll of infection and death exceeds that of the “first wave” of COVID-19 in March and April.

A similar disaster could result in Australia, as more infections inevitably reach its shores, with doctors warning that public health systems still lack the resources to deal with a rapid resurgence. That is what happened in Victoria in July and August, when infections suddenly soared to over 700 a day, overwhelming the contact tracing system.

As a result, Australia's officially-recorded infection cases rose to 27,391 by yesterday, with 907 deaths, 819 of them in Victoria. The lockdown in Victoria eventually contained the surge, only to see the ruling elite again demand the scrapping of most safety measures.

The dangers of a new surge have been on display in

Melbourne's northern suburbs over the past week, where 39 confirmed cases sprang from an infection suffered by a nurse at Box Hill Hospital, part of Victoria's underfunded public health system. Likewise in Western Australia, the state's Australian Medical Association president Andrew Miller warned that the health system was not ready for large outbreaks of COVID-19, and that the testing, tracking and tracing capacity had to be improved.

As far as the ruling class is concerned, however, Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews's announcement on Monday of major concessions to the corporate campaign—such as allowing retail shops, restaurants, bars and other high-risk hospitality businesses to reopen—was nowhere near enough.

According to big business, crowd capacity limits and other safety precautions must be substantially swept aside, and much faster than Andrews indicated, and every state government must end their partial border shutdowns, so that profit-making can resume unhindered.

Liberal-National Prime Minister Scott Morrison gave full voice to this demand in parliament on Tuesday, declaring that there must be no return to lockdowns. “We cannot look to a future of lockdowns as a way of managing this virus,” he insisted. In other words, regardless of the likelihood of future COVID-19 outbreaks, no shutdown measures can be countenanced.

Morrison's demand was endorsed by the Business Council of Australia (BCA), the Australian Industry Group and tourism chiefs. Australian Tourism Industry Council managing director Simon Westaway said it was imperative for Christmas holiday bookings that borders be opened as soon as possible.

BCA chief executive Jennifer Westacott, representing the largest companies, said reopening domestic borders by Christmas would be a “\$3 billion gift to Australians.” She added: “Arbitrary border closures are a job-destroying blunt weapon.”

With slogans such as these, big business is cynically claiming to champion the interests of separated families, jobless workers and ruined small business operators, who face mass unemployment, bankruptcy and impoverishment.

By putting an unsubstantiated \$3 billion tag on the alleged economic benefits of a full reopening, Westacott gave away the aim of this agitation. It has nothing to do with any concern for families, workers or small business.

On the contrary, the corporate giants are intent on exploiting the pandemic to further radically restructure the economy. They are slashing jobs, wages, working conditions and social spending, and driving smaller business rivals to the wall, all with the help of a partnership forged in months of backrooms talks between the Morrison government and the trade unions.

Once again, misleading myths are being peddled that Australia has exceptionally succeeded in containing the virus. In May, having bailed out the corporate elite to the tune of hundreds of billions of dollars, the “National Cabinet” of Liberal-National and Labor government leaders agreed to a premature and dangerous lifting of restrictions, claiming to have “flattened” the coronavirus “curve.”

Instead of the elimination strategy strongly urged by epidemiologists, the de facto coalition government opted for a “containment” policy, under which the virus would be allowed to continue to circulate. The government leaders claimed that infections could be kept at manageable levels through contact tracing and testing.

On June 3, the Socialist Equality Party issued a statement, “Oppose the premature lifting of COVID-19 safety restrictions!” The party warned: “Via decrees agreed by the so-called national cabinet, Liberal-National and Labor governments alike are gambling with the lives of the population.” This was quickly vindicated—infection rates climbed steadily in Victoria in June, before erupting in July with hundreds of new cases confirmed every day.

Australian governments have not explicitly embraced the homicidal doctrine of “herd immunity,” adopted by the Trump White House and the Johnson government in Britain. Public health experts globally have condemned the anti-scientific policy of letting the virus infect most of the population.

But the same ruling class calculations of subordinating human life to the requirements of private profits, by “reopening” the economy and getting workers back into workplaces, can be seen in the Australian financial press.

The October 27 editorial in the *Australian Financial*

Review said the “real test” as to whether the Andrews government had abandoned the “cult of elimination” would come “when case numbers inevitably increase and hotspots emerge.”

On the same day, the *Australian* ramped up the pressure on Gladys Berejiklian, the premier of neighbouring New South Wales, to end the partial closure of the border between the two states. Threateningly, its editorial said, this was a “moment of truth” for Berejiklian, against whom a barrage of corruption-related allegations has been launched this month.

An October 24 feature in the *Australian Financial Review* laid bare the callous logic of the “reopening” demands. Health editor, Jill Margo’s headline presented the extraordinary question: “Has Australia been too successful in combating COVID-19?”

“With a vaccine months away and new case numbers in the low single digits, the Australian government needs a national plan for living with the virus,” the article’s introduction declared. “Living with the virus” means actively permitting the deadly infections to “percolate through the community” on the false, medically-discredited basis that eventually some level of “herd immunity” will result.

As Margo stated, her article was based on the Great Barrington Declaration, a manifesto by the free-market American Institute for Economic Research, which calls for the abandonment of all measures to contain the pandemic.

This discussion, currently taking place in ruling circles, is a warning of the ruthless readiness of the capitalist class in Australia, like everywhere else, to sacrifice working class lives to boost the fortunes of the wealthy. This underscores the necessity for the working class to take action independently of, and in opposition to, the trade unions.

To protect themselves, workers must form rank-and-file committees in every factory and workplace, fighting to ensure their own health and safety. This poses the necessity for the struggle to overturn the private profit system and transform society along socialist lines.



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