South Australian COVID-19 outbreak highlights dangers of “reopening” campaign

Oscar Grenfell
18 November 2020

A sudden coronavirus outbreak in South Australia (SA) underscores the reckless character of a pro-business campaign by the state and federal governments and the corporate elite for the overturning of all COVID-19 safety restrictions prior to Christmas.

On Sunday afternoon, SA health authorities announced they had identified four infections in the capital city of Adelaide, all locally-acquired. Infections caused by community transmission were last previously confirmed in the state in April.

Government officials and the media had proclaimed the virus effectively “eliminated” in SA and lifted most lockdown measures. Mass gatherings, large sporting events and substantial attendance at high-risk venues, including bars, clubs, restaurants and gyms, were resumed months ago.

Infections increased to 17 on Monday, and 22 today, with another 7 suspected cases awaiting confirmation.

While the numbers remain relatively small, the highly infectious nature of the virus and the removal of virtually all lockdown measures in the state sparked warnings from health experts of the potential for a rapid COVID-19 spread.

In just four days, the number of Adelaide residents instructed by state authorities to self-isolate and seek testing, because they may have been exposed to the coronavirus, has grown from around 100 on Sunday, to over 4,000 as of this morning. Almost 50 separate locations, including medical facilities, restaurants and schools, have been identified as potential sites of transmission because they were visited by people who have since tested positive.

SA Liberal Party Premier Steven Marshall today announced a six-day partial statewide lockdown, including school, hospitality and construction site closures and bans on people leaving their homes. He described it as a “circuit breaker,” yet it falls far short of the period required to medically assess any suppression of virus transmission. Significantly, the SA outbreak was announced two days after last Friday’s meeting of the “national cabinet,” an unconstitutional body of federal, state and territory leaders. It has largely ruled by decree throughout the pandemic and overseen the lifting of safety measures at the behest of big business.

At the Friday gathering, Prime Minister Scott Morrison and state premiers discussed reopening all state borders by Christmas. Dominant sections of the corporate elite have denounced the maintenance of travel restrictions as an unacceptable barrier to a complete reopening of the economy for the lucrative holiday season.

State premiers who retained some border restrictions, particularly in Queensland and Western Australia, have come under fire in the corporate press. To the extent that the governments in those states have not yet completely opened their borders, it has been motivated by fears of the business consequences of further COVID-19 outbreaks. Significant exemptions have been in place for months, moreover, especially for major sporting competitions and other corporate activities, on top of the continued operation of factories and reopening of schools.

The South Australian outbreak has complicated the reopening drive. Authorities in Queensland, the Northern Territory, Victoria and Tasmania have labelled Adelaide a COVID-19 hotspot, so interstate travellers from the city must quarantine for a fortnight. Western Australia has re-closed its eastern border.

Despite the dangers that have been revealed, powerful sections of the political and media establishment have doubled down on their demands for a lifting of border restrictions. Corporate chiefs told the media it is impermissible to return to the “blunt instruments” of lockdowns and border closures.

Prime Minister Morrison immediately insisted it was necessary to “press on” with the reopening agenda. New

© World Socialist Web Site

South Wales Premier Gladys Berejiklian declared: “We need to live with COVID and every time there is an outbreak, you can’t shut down borders and disrupt lives and businesses.”

This is in line with the criminally-negligent response of governments and the entire political establishment throughout the pandemic, which has been motivated solely by corporate profit interests.

In April, state and federal leaders, Labor and Liberal-National alike, rejected a plan by epidemiologists aimed at eliminating coronavirus transmission, saying it would be too costly. Instead they opted for a “containment” strategy—the virus would be allowed to continue circulating, but would supposedly be kept at “manageable” levels through contact-tracing and localised restrictions when “clusters” emerged.

This led to a mass outbreak in Victoria in July, with thousands of infections and hundreds of deaths. That surge was only brought under control many weeks later, after the state Labor government was compelled to institute a “stage four” lockdown, involving closures of schools and some businesses amid fears that the entire health system would collapse.

Commentators have pointed to parallels between the South Australian outbreak and the last “wave” in Victoria. Many of the infections in Victoria originated in the hotel quarantine system for international travellers returning to Melbourne. The state Labor government outsourced operations at the facilities to private security companies which employed low-paid casual workers without any medical experience.

The Adelaide outbreak too has been traced to SA’s quarantine hotels. A worker at one of the facilities unwittingly caught the virus before transmitting it to her relatives. The infection was only discovered after an elderly family member went to hospital with respiratory issues.

It has been revealed that hotel quarantine staff were not tested unless they were displaying symptoms, despite being on the virus frontline, and that 40 percent or more of infections in SA are asymptomatic.

The quarantine worker and her relatives live near Elizabeth, a working class suburb in outer northern Adelaide. The area has been devastated by decades of trade union and government-enforced job cuts culminating in the 2017 closure of the General Motors Holden car plant, around which the suburb was originally built.

Unemployment in the area today stands at an estimated 40 percent, and rates of poverty have skyrocketed. Those who do have a job are often employed on a casual basis and can be forced to travel large distances to get to work.

During the previous Victorian outbreak the most exploited sections of the working class were hardest hit because of the precarious character of their employment, the absence of adequate financial assistance to self-isolate, and a lack of medical and other social services.

Concerns have been raised about South Australia’s testing capabilities. Adelaide northern suburbs residents report having to wait up to eight hours for a test, amid hot weather.

There is also no evidence that contact-tracing abilities have improved at a national level, even though a failure to track the spread of the virus contributed to the scope of Victoria’s surge.

Significantly, Morrison, backed by the SA government, has rapidly deployed military personnel to Adelaide. Governments have used the pandemic to expand the domestic use of the armed forces, while doing little or nothing to improve chronically under-funded health capabilities.

The deployment of troops is motivated by concerns in ruling circles over growing social and political opposition. While infections in Australia have been far lower than in Europe, the United States and internationally, the same pro-business response to the pandemic has been evident. The Adelaide outbreak further refutes claims that Australia can be isolated from the worsening global health crisis amid the refusal of governments to institute necessary lockdown and health measures.

In addition, Australian governments have used the pandemic to funnel billions of dollars to the corporations, while presiding over mass unemployment and rapidly growing poverty, and accelerating attacks on jobs, wages and working conditions.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site