Sydney COVID-19 outbreak follows pro-business lifting of Australian safety restrictions

Oscar Grenfell
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A sudden outbreak of coronavirus cases, centred in Sydney's northern beaches, has again exposed the dangerous lifting of virtually all safety restrictions by Australian governments. The spate of infections follows a frenzied "reopening" campaign by the ruling elite, aimed at maximising corporate profit-making, especially over the holiday season.

The cluster has underscored the speed with which the virus can spread under conditions of widespread travel, the opening of all schools and businesses, including those that pose a risk of mass transmission, and the effective abolition of social distancing.

This morning, New South Wales (NSW) Premier Gladys Berejiklian announced that the northern beaches, with a population of 253,000, would be placed under a lockdown, effective from this afternoon until midnight on Wednesday. Residents of the region, which includes some affluent suburbs, will be permitted to leave their homes only for "essential" purposes.

The cosmetic character of the measure, however, is demonstrated by the fact that in addition to grocery shopping, attending work is exempted from the lockdown. Many businesses in the area had already shut after case numbers rose significantly on Thursday, so Berejiklian's "lockdown' is effectively a maintenance of the status quo. Thousands of people from the "hotspot" areas will still travel throughout the city for employment purposes.

Berejiklian declared that greater Sydney needed to be on "high alert," but announced no policy to prevent further transmission outside the northern beaches. There are no requirements for masks to be worn. Mass gatherings, including large sporting events, are proceeding. Clubs can have hundreds of patrons on their premises.

After months of low community transmission, 23 locally-acquired cases were recorded in Sydney in the 24 hours to 8pm yesterday. There are currently 42 active cases, with just seven of them overseas travellers in hotel quarantine.

Information from health authorities about the locally-acquired cases has been vague, in line with the government's attempt to downplay the outbreak. This has led to contradictory media reports and substantial public confusion. The majority of the community transmission infections, however, are in the northern beaches, with two others in Sydney's southeast.

It was only on Wednesday that the state recorded its first locally-acquired case in more than a fortnight, when a driver for international flight crews tested positive. Later that day, it was reported that an elderly couple from the northern beaches had contracted the virus.

The outbreak's "patient zero" has not been identified, so authorities do not know how the cluster began. There could be multiple chains of transmission, raising the prospect of many more cases than those identified and a greater geographical spread of the infections than reported.

NSW chief medical officer Kerry Chant said that "overall" the northern beaches cases are predominantly linked to the Avalon Returned Services League and bowling club. Other likely transmission sites include local gyms, as well as dozens of restaurants and cafes.

The outbreak is closely connected to non-essential businesses, which have been permitted to operate with virtually no restrictions in place. This demonstrates the responsibility of the government and its "reopening" agenda for the spate of infections.

The major airlines may also have contributed to the cluster.

Since the pandemic began, Qantas and Virgin have been provided with massive cash handouts from state and federal governments, as they laid-off thousands of workers. Both declared early in the pandemic that there would be no social distancing on their flights, because that would affect passenger volumes and profit.

International flights, involving airlines from around the world, have been ramped up over the past two months, as the

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pandemic has surged in the United States, Europe and elsewhere. More than 100 international flights are arriving in Sydney every week.

While international arrivals have been required to quarantine in a government-run hotel program, flight crews have been permitted to self-isolate of their own accord. Given that crewmembers are no less likely to be carrying the virus than their passengers, and that many are coming from centres of mass transmission, there is no health rationale for this policy. Its sole purpose is to minimise the impact of the pandemic on airline profits.

Numerous airlines have breached even the inadequate self-quarantine requirements. This week, the media revealed that 13 staff who manned a repatriation flight from South America were fined after travelling around the city. The incident occurred at the beginning of the month and was hidden from the public by the state government.

In another case, a United Airlines flight attendant was released from quarantine within 24 hours, despite showing symptoms of COVID-19 infection, after lobbying from company executives.

Only this week, after the northern beaches outbreak erupted, did Berejiklian announce that crews would be placed in mandatory quarantine beginning next Tuesday.

For months, experts have pointed to the dangers of quarantining international arrivals in hotels located in the centres of the country's largest cities, where the overwhelming majority of the population lives. Calls for regional quarantines have been rejected.

Hotel quarantines have been involved in most COVID-19 outbreaks across Australia. In the state of Victoria, the Labor government outsourced the program to private security contractors, which hired low-paid casual workers without any health training. This contributed to a major outbreak in July-August, with thousands of infections and hundreds of deaths.

Testing rates have remained low in NSW for months, in line with government claims that the state had all but "defeated" the virus. The lack of health infrastructure, 11 months into a global pandemic, has been demonstrated by mass queues throughout the northern beaches for testing. Residents have waited in line for six hours or more, throughout the hottest parts of the day, only to be told that the testing facility was closing and they should come back the next day.

The concern among ordinary people over the outbreak, reflected in the large testing queues, refutes the claims of government ministers that the outbreak is the result of "public complacency."

The NSW Liberal government, with the full support of the state Labor opposition, has been in the forefront of the campaign to lift coronavirus restrictions, regardless of the health consequences. In this, they have collaborated closely with the federal Liberal-National Coalition government, and all the state and territory leaders, Labor and Liberal alike, in an extra-constitutional "national cabinet."

For months, Berejiklian, Prime Minister Scott Morrison and all the big business politicians, including Labor premiers, have insisted that the priority is to "reopen" the economy in the lead-up to the holiday season. Their aim, notwithstanding cynical rhetoric about families coming together over Christmas, has been to maximise the profit-making opportunities of the largest corporations.

All governments have rejected calls, since April, for a policy aimed at the effective elimination of community transmission of the virus, because the school and workplace shutdowns required would have too great an impact on big business. Instead, they have insisted that the population must "live with the virus" in a new "COVID-normal."

Morrison, Berejiklian and the other premiers have acknowledged that this will result in further virus outbreaks. Their claims that clusters can be locally isolated were refuted by the mass infections in Melbourne, and experiences around the world.

The reopening of state borders, some of which were closed earlier in the pandemic, has been a central plank of the reopening drive. As a consequence, tens of thousands of Sydney residents are travelling throughout the country, posing the risk of outbreaks everywhere.

State and territory leaders have responded with rushed announcements. Some are calling for Sydney travellers to self-isolate, and others are threatening mandatory quarantines. This is creating a confusing patchwork of travel regulations and a substantial crisis for many ordinary people who face the prospect of being stranded interstate.

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