

Sydney COVID-19 outbreak highlights global threat but Australian governments oppose effective safety restrictions

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The continuing spread of a COVID-19 outbreak in Sydney, Australia's largest city, has underscored both the worldwide nature of the pandemic and the threat posed to working class lives by the "economic reopening" drive by governments and the corporate elite everywhere.

Once again, the myth of Australia, and neighbouring New Zealand, being exceptions to the global health emergency has been shattered. Just weeks after the end of a months-long outbreak that caused more than 700 deaths in Melbourne, the demands of big business and its political representatives for lifting of all safety restrictions have created serious dangers for people across Sydney and the continent.

While not on the scale of the catastrophes confronting the populations of North America, Europe and many other parts of the world, the expansion of the outbreak in Sydney since last Thursday has shown how quickly disastrous conditions can result from the subordination of basic public health precautions to corporate profit interests.

New South Wales (NSW) state Premier Gladys Berejiklian today reported that 15 new "locally-acquired" coronavirus cases had been recorded in Sydney in the previous 24 hours, taking the size of the cluster in the city's northern beaches region to 83. Another 8 infections were reported in quarantine hotels for international arrivals.

Seeking to play down the risks, Berejiklian said this was a "pleasing" reduction from the previous day's total of 30 local cases.

Yet, the danger of a large-scale disaster remains. A growing number of popular venues in Sydney's north, inner city and inner west have been added to NSW Health's warning list as authorities track COVID-19's spread from the northern beaches. Residents from all parts

of the city are now being urged to get tested and self-isolate if they have symptoms.

Moreover, according to the state Liberal-National government, mystery still surrounds the source of the cluster, with genomic testing suggesting "Patient Zero" was likely an arriving passenger or aircrew member from the United States.

Berejiklian said more than 38,000 people were tested in the 24 hours to 8.00 p.m. yesterday—a record number for NSW during the pandemic. But that is a small number compared to the northern beaches' population of over a quarter of a million people, let alone that of greater Sydney, which is home to almost five million.

Together with the media, Prime Minister Scott Morrison's federal Liberal-National government has for months hailed Berejiklian's administration as providing "gold standard" COVID-19 testing and contact-tracing that made broader safety restrictions unnecessary. However, an almost week-long delay in detecting and acting on the outbreak was indicated when NSW Chief Health Officer Kerry Chant said the "seeding event" was believed to have been at a suburban club on December 11.

Backed by Morrison, the state government has refused to mandate mask-wearing, even in infected suburbs. As in Melbourne's outbreak, where the state Labor government failed to contain the virus in July, the NSW government restrictions on movement remain partial and limited to the northern beaches. Even there, sweeping exemptions exist for work and shopping, and the restrictions are due to end on Wednesday, in time for Christmas.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison yesterday called for calm, saying: "It's not the first outbreak we've seen. There have been many, not just in NSW, but other states and territories." At the same time, he offered to expand the deployment of the military to help enforce any

movement restrictions.

In other words, such developments, potentially threatening the lives of thousands of ordinary people, and involving troops in domestic operations, must be accepted as part of what governments and the media call the new “normal.”

The latest emergency has further exposed the gulf between the concerns of ordinary people, and the seriousness with which they regard the pandemic, and the contemptuous indifference, lack of preparations and running down of public health services by governments.

Government ministers have repeatedly claimed that such outbreaks are the result of “public complacency.” Yet, across Sydney’s northern beaches region, some small businesses closed voluntarily and thousands of residents continued to queue for hours over the weekend at overwhelmed testing clinics.

Tens of thousands of people across Australia have travelled interstate, either for holidays or family visits—but all on the basis of government and media assurances, and encouragement, that the pandemic was under control and they could have a “normal” Christmas-New Year. In chaotic scenes, they are making expensive and often heart-breaking efforts to rush back home before border controls kick in.

While the corporate media outlets are focusing on the resulting personal distress, they are silent on the responsibility of all those in ruling circles who covered up the ongoing COVID dangers in the interests of big business.

Epidemiologists are calling for lockdowns, vastly ramped-up testing facilities and mandatory mask-wearing, warning that Christmas and New Year gatherings could otherwise become super-spreader events. The Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s “Coronavirus” host Dr Norman Swan said there was no question that the state government should put Sydney into lockdown and make masks mandatory.

University of NSW epidemiologist Raina MacIntyre told the *Australian* that New Year’s Eve was likely to be “the mother of all super-spreading events.” A disaster could result if large numbers of people, now infectious but asymptomatic, travel across Sydney on Christmas Day and infect others. Many of those people would then be at the peak of their infectiousness during New Year’s Eve celebrations.

NSW Health Minister Brad Hazzard unwittingly provided a rare picture of the ruthlessness of the big business in refusing to tolerate elementary safety

precautions that might affect their bottom lines. He said airlines had threatened to boycott NSW after the state government belatedly responded to the outbreak by requiring aircrews to quarantine in police-patrolled hotels.

For months, both Morrison and Berejiklian, together with their Labor Party colleagues in the unelected “national cabinet,” have spearheaded the corporate agitation for no more lockdowns.

In July, Berejiklian declared on national television: “We cannot shut down every time we have a cluster of cases.” Shutting down and reopening “creates chaos for businesses” she insisted.

As recently as October 27, Morrison said the country should not embrace a “future of lockdowns.” His push to lift all border restrictions was endorsed by the Business Council of Australia, Australian Industry Group, tourism chiefs and heads of the Brisbane, Melbourne and Canberra airports.

Editorials today in the establishment media backed the NSW state government’s supposedly “proportionate” refusal to introduce wider lockdowns, and castigated other state and territory governments for reintroducing border restrictions on travel to and from Sydney.

Today’s *Australian Financial Review* editorial complained that the Australian stock exchange closed lower last Friday, for the first time in seven weeks, because of “the uncertainty hanging over reopened Australia that hit retail and travel stocks hard.” It said the country was “now tipping into a damaging open/shut cycle” and demanded adherence to the national cabinet’s “hotspot strategy” to “keep the nation open.”

Likewise, the *Australian* editorial praised the Berejiklian government for “doing as much as possible” to avoid a “debilitating lockdown” in the week leading up to Christmas.

Around the world, the COVID-19 resurgence is a product of the profit-driven lifting of restrictions on commerce by governments. As warned by the *World Socialist Web Site* since the outset of the pandemic, these actions are leading to mass infections and deaths, now totaling 1.7 million, as well as widespread poverty.



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