Australian COVID-19 outbreak spreads beyond Sydney, but governments reject calls for lockdowns and masks

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Backed by its federal counterpart, the Liberal-National government in the Australian state of New South Wales (NSW) has flatly rejected calls by epidemiologists and other medical experts for immediate lockdowns and mandatory mask-wearing to stop the potentially catastrophic spread of the COVID-19 outbreak that began in Sydney on December 11.

This response typifies that of governments globally. It is to cover up the extent of the danger of the pandemic that has so far claimed more than 1.7 million lives, and subordinate even the most essential public health requirements to the profit interests of the corporate elites, from the finance houses to the airline and tourism companies and the retail giants.

Already, Australia's latest coronavirus "cluster" has escaped from Sydney's northern beaches region across the city. Transmission events have been officially recorded in Sydney's centre, north shore and inner-west, as well as interstate, with the first infection from the outbreak reported in the neighbouring state of Victoria.

Yesterday, the NSW government also confirmed what had already been reported by the World Health Organisation: that cases of the much-more infectious COVID-19 strain from Britain have been detected inside Sydney's quarantine hotels for returned international travellers. This variant is now "out of control" in the UK, as the British government declared this week, after claiming not to have even heard of it since it was first detected in September.

Supermarkets, gyms, beauty salons and cinemas have joined a growing list of 140 venues on NSW Health coronavirus alerts, extending into Sydney's working-class western suburbs of Blacktown and Penrith, and as far north as Forster on the state's mid-north coast. People who visited these locations are being told to either immediately self-isolate for 14 days or get tested and self-isolate until NSW Health provides further information. There is also a long list of alerts for train and bus trips, not all from northern beaches.

This crisis highlights the social and political gulf between capitalist governments and the working class, the vast majority of the population. In contrast to the official refusal to take effective safety measures, tens of thousands of residents yesterday joined kilometre-length queues, for four hours or more, in Sydney's inner-western suburbs and other sites, often being turned away before the end of the day.

These experiences, repeating those of Sydney's northern beaches residents last weekend, further laid bare the lack of government planning, preparation and testing capacity for the worsening global pandemic, despite misleading official and media claims of Australia having a first-class health system and "gold-standard" testing and tracing facilities.

So far, the infections reported in Australia are nowhere near the calamitous levels of Europe, North America and many other parts of the world, but the risk exists of similar scenes of overwhelmed hospitals and morgues.

Once again, as with the recently-ended four-month emergency in Victoria, which claimed 801 lives, the myth of Australia being an exception to the contagion has been shattered.

Eight new coronavirus cases were officially reported in NSW in the 24 hours to 8:00 p.m. Monday. Seven of the cases are linked to the Sydney northern beaches

outbreak, bringing its total number to 90. The other case was a nurse from western Sydney who was involved in transporting "several positive COVID cases" in hotel quarantine.

Despite these danger signs, the federal and state governments have defied the advice of health experts. Philip Russo, president of the Australasian College for Infection Prevention and Control, told the media yesterday that the current temporary and partial restrictions on households in Sydney's northern beaches should be extended statewide within 48 hours.

Speaking on the "Sunrise" television program yesterday morning, Australian Medical Association president Dr Omar Khorshid said Sydney residents should have to wear masks. Australian National University Associate Professor Senjaya Senanayake, an infectious diseases physician, said it was a "no brainer" that masks should be mandatory in Sydney in indoor areas and on public transport.

Dr Fiona Stanaway, a clinical epidemiologist at the University of Sydney School of Public Health, warned it would take "several weeks" to confirm whether the cluster had been contained. Another leading epidemiologist, University of NSW Professor Mary-Louise McLaws, said there was a danger that "the horse may have already bolted if the greater community has begun seeding and creating secondary generations."

Yet Prime Minister Scott Morrison declared at a media conference yesterday: "What we are looking at here is an outbreak in one quite geographically defined part of Sydney which at the moment is not suggesting broader seeding and having a broader impact."

Morrison again said people should stay "calm" because "we will get through this like we have got through so many other events." His message is that people have to become accustomed to COVID-19 surges.

The entire government response is driven by the profit concerns of big business. NSW Premier Gladys Berejiklian's government admitted yesterday that flight crew who live in NSW are still allowed to self-isolate at home, unsupervised, although foreign airline crews are now belatedly required to stay in police-patrolled hotels. That concession was revealed after major airlines threatened to boycott Sydney.

Further evidence of the domination of corporate interests came with yesterday's report of a Victorian Labor state government inquiry into that state's disastrous COVID-19 "second wave," which was triggered by infections transmitted from quarantine hotels. While claiming that no one in that government was actually responsible, the report pointed to the lack of planning for such predicted pandemics, the use of inherently ill-designed private hotels that act as infection hotspots, and the virtually automatic resort to private contractors that employed untrained and poorly-paid security guards.

The demands of the corporate chiefs for an end to any travel or other restrictions were reiterated in a statement issued yesterday by peak business groups, including the Australian Retailers Association, the Business Council of Australia, Airlines for Australia and New Zealand, Restaurant & Catering, the National Farmers Federation and the Tourism & Transport Forum. It called for the bipartisan "national cabinet," comprised of Liberal-National and Labor Party federal, state and territory leaders to meet urgently to end the disruption of their operations caused by state border closures.

"Australians cannot spend the entire Christmas and New Year season in limbo," the statement insisted. "Right now, businesses do not know whether they can get back up and running again and airlines don't know what schedules to run."

In Australia, as globally, the resurgence of COVID-19 is the direct result of such ruthless business demands. This underlines the need for a unified worldwide struggle by the working class to overturn the capitalist profit system, which now threatens the lives, health and livelihoods of millions more people.