

Australian COVID-19 outbreak underscores danger of corporate drive to lift safety restrictions

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Under obvious big business and media pressure, the government of Australia's most populous state yesterday partially lifted some of the limited safety restrictions it had implemented in Sydney, despite warnings from infectious diseases experts that it is far too early to know how far the city's COVID-19 outbreak has spread.

After a "crisis" cabinet meeting of the state's Liberal-National government, New South Wales (NSW) Premier Gladys Berejiklian announced that restrictions would be relaxed in half the city's northern beaches region—the current epicentre of the virus resurgence. Unlimited numbers of under-12 aged children can be included in household gatherings there, and across Greater Sydney during a three-day Christmas period.

Contrary to the results of scientific studies globally, Berejiklian claimed that young children were not infectious. Gatherings of up to 10 people, plus children, are permitted throughout the metropolitan area, home to five million people, and up to 50 elsewhere across the state. Inexplicably, residents of the southern half of the northern beaches are still not allowed to leave their infected zone, yet can host visitors from anywhere.

The resulting danger, as epidemiologists have warned, is that Christmas and subsequent New Year celebrations could become "super-spreader" events. This underscores the risk of another disaster like the recent four-month outbreak in the neighbouring state of Victoria, where the premature business-driven lifting of restrictions and a failed hotel quarantine system led to more than 800 of the country's 908 virus deaths.

The spread of the Sydney outbreak over the past week highlights the global character of the coronavirus pandemic, which has so far claimed more than 1.7 million lives. Once again, the resurgence has exposed the government- and media-cultivated myth that Australia and nearby New Zealand have "beaten" or even contained COVID-19.

The rejection by the government of pleas by medical

scientists for basic precautionary measures, such as temporary lockdowns and mandatory mask-wearing, underscores the domination of corporate profit-making interests over the lives, health and livelihoods of the population.

Today, like every day this week, new recorded cases have been added to the Sydney outbreak. The official total currently exceeds 100, including one interstate in Melbourne. The list of feared infection sites posted by the health authorities—featuring supermarkets, shopping malls, gyms, clubs and restaurants—has been continually extended as well. It already covers working-class suburbs throughout the metropolitan area and towns across NSW. Today, residents of 36 suburbs in the state's Central Coast region were urged to get tested because of COVID traces in the sewage system.

Despite the claims of "gold-standard" testing and contact tracing facilities, residents of potential hotspot suburbs have queued for up to six hours at testing sites. "Patient Zero" has not been identified either, although genomic testing has shown the infection to be a US variant. That means the virus could have escaped more widely before the first local cases were reportedly "seeded" on December 11.

The contrast could not be greater between the profit-driven corporate and government response, and the public responsibility displayed by the tens of thousands of residents who have lined up patiently to get tested this week, and then self-isolate for 48 hours or more while awaiting results.

Yesterday, the federal Liberal-National government revealed, via Chief Health Officer Paul Kelly, a doubling to four in the number of arriving international travellers infected with the new more contagious COVID-19 variant that is "out of control" in Britain. Nevertheless, flights from the UK have not been blocked, on the false premise that Australia's hotel quarantine system has proven effective in preventing coronavirus transmissions.

Epidemiologists and public health experts have said it

remains “critical” for the health authorities to track down the first case that led to the outbreak, as well as expand the testing, make mask wearing compulsory and extend movement and gathering restrictions throughout Sydney.

Among the experts whose advice the state government rejected is World Health Organisation adviser and professor of epidemiology at the University of NSW, Mary-Louise McLaws. Speaking before Berejiklian’s announcement of reduced restrictions, she said the existing rules should remain over the Christmas break, because it was too early to make any sort of judgment from an outbreak management perspective.

“We look for at least one to two day incubation periods, preferably that is 14 days of zero to ensure that this large cluster has finished at the northern beaches,” McLaws told the “Today Show” television program. “We have multiple sites outside of Sydney that haven’t quite had a full incubation period.”

McLaws said the unknown source person could have been asymptomatic and might have been in contact with people who travelled interstate for the holidays a couple of weeks ago, before other state and territory governments reimposed border restrictions this week in response to the Sydney outbreak.

The voice of the capitalist class was sounded when the Business Council of Australia (BCA), representing the largest companies operating in Australia, joined other business groups on Tuesday to demand an “urgent” national cabinet meeting to end border shutdowns and set “predictable” rules to manage “inevitable local outbreaks.”

As published in the Nine Network newspapers, BCA chief executive Jennifer Westacott wrote: “We cannot continue going on with a stop-start economy, where families and businesses fall victim to inconsistent rules.” While claiming that they agreed with “safeguarding Australians,” the business chiefs insisted that the population had to “live with” the virus, in the interests of economic “recovery,” because a vaccine rollout “won’t happen overnight.”

The underlying agenda of the financial elite was spelled out in yesterday’s *Australian Financial Review* editorial. It told Prime Minister Scott Morrison he “must not waste this crisis.” Instead, he had to “get on with injecting reform into the recovery.” This is precisely what big business has been doing for months exploiting the pandemic to justify sweeping workplace changes that slash wages, jobs and conditions.

The editorial declared: “Creating herd immunity globally by vaccination may take years if ever, and the virus may spring back in new mutations.” It said the “virus shock” must be used to impose “serious tax reform” and changes to “byzantine industrial relations system.”

After offering the Morrison government “constructive” support throughout the year, federal Labor leader Anthony Albanese yesterday tried to appease public unrest by calling for earlier delivery of a vaccine. But that is no substitute for immediate action to protect lives.

The sole concern of the ruling class, like its counterparts in every country, is to boost the share prices of the major corporations and enlarge the bank accounts of the super-rich. Health and lives are being sacrificed to “economic revival”—that is, to the drive for corporate profit.

Working people must insist that measures be put in place immediately, based on the best scientific advice, to protect the population and guarantee a decent standard of living for all.

Instead of governments pouring hundreds of billions of dollars into corporate pockets via “support packages” and into military war preparations, society’s resources must be invested in health care infrastructure to treat, contain and eradicate COVID-19. That means reversing the chronic under-funding of medical research, public hospitals and aged care homes in order to ensure people are protected from the threat of infectious disease.

This is above all a political issue not just a health issue. The massive sums monopolised by the financial elite must be seized and used to meet these and other essential social needs as part of the socialist reorganisation of society as a whole. Matters cannot be left in the hands of the corporate elite and their political servants. Workers need to intervene independently in the political struggle for a workers’ government.

We urge all our readers who agree with this fight to contact us and join the Socialist Equality Party.



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