

Coronavirus cluster continues to grow in Sydney, Australia

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A cluster of coronavirus infections in Sydney, Australia has grown to 160 cases detected in the past two weeks, with a grossly inadequate government response allowing continued community transmission of the dangerous disease.

The state Liberal government of Premier Gladys Berejiklian is prioritising the demands of big business over public health and safety. Urgent warnings issued by epidemiologists and health experts are being ignored, with basic preventive measures not in place. Wearing masks is not compulsory anywhere in Sydney, retail and other industries are continuing to function as usual, major sporting events are still being held, as is the fireworks display scheduled for New Year's Eve.

The New South Wales government has rejected city-wide lockdown restrictions, despite the fact that a similar surge in the state of Victoria earlier in the year was only brought under control through such measures.

Berejiklian has instead insisted that the state's contact tracing system—repeatedly promoted by Prime Minister Scott Morrison as the “gold standard”—can contain the virus's spread by testing and isolating close contacts of those with confirmed infections. This approach amounts to a gamble with people's health and wellbeing.

Transmission has already spread beyond the initial site of the cluster in Sydney's Northern Beaches area. Berejiklian today announced that 18 new locally contracted infections were detected in the last 24 hours, with only half of these connected with the initial Avalon cluster. Others were classified as part of a new, separate cluster in Croydon, a suburb in Sydney's inner west. The premier noted that these infected people had recently been in the city's central business district, and she stated that further infections connected with the new cluster were expected in coming days.

Three other infections are “mystery” cases, with public health officials so far unable to determine when and where the people became infected. These include two cases from residents of Wollongong, a city 70 kilometres south of Sydney, indicating coronavirus infections spreading out of Sydney and into regional New South Wales.

The real situation remains unclear, in part because of low testing rates. Daily tests peaked at nearly 70,000 before Christmas but yesterday just 17,000 tests were conducted. Inadequate testing infrastructure was again revealed after the Wollongong infections were announced—residents of the city had to queue for up to five hours to receive a test.

While ordinary people continue to take the coronavirus threat seriously, the government is deliberately encouraging complacency. Berejiklian today stated that she is “expecting the numbers [of confirmed infections] to bounce around for several weeks.”

There is no plan to eliminate the virus from Sydney. Instead, a business-as-usual approach is being encouraged. The premier has announced only minimal restrictions in response to the evidence of growing community transmission. Sizeable outdoor gatherings are still permitted, though the maximum number has been reduced from 50 to 30. Ahead of New Year's Eve, a maximum of five household visitors are permitted.

The tokenistic character of these measures is evident in the government's decision to authorise the holding of the scheduled test cricket match between Australia and India, beginning January 7. The Sydney Cricket Ground will host 24,000 people (at 50 percent capacity) each day for up to five days—representing what is potentially an officially sanctioned, super spreader

event.

Other tourist draw cards are likewise proceeding, including Sydney Opera House events and the Sydney Arts Festival.

The New South Wales government's recklessness and indifference is a class issue. The entire political establishment represents the interests of big business and finance capital, and the corporate elite has insisted that any preventive measures put in place amid the pandemic must not hinder the continued extraction of surplus value from the working class.

In the neighbouring state of Victoria, a "second wave" of mass infections threatened to trigger the collapse of the underfunded hospital system, forcing the state government, amid widespread public concern, to enact protracted lockdown restrictions between July and October.

These measures opened up divisions within the ruling class, however, with one wing opposing lockdowns and implicitly favouring widespread infections and deaths. Berejiklian was among those critical of the Victorian response, and she has indicated that equivalent measures will not be enacted in Sydney and New South Wales, regardless of the infection spread.

The government and media are seeking to promote various diversions to deflect growing unease and opposition among working people.

A manufactured furore was whipped up over a gathering of young people on Sydney's Bronte beach on Christmas Day. A few hundred people, mostly backpackers, partied on the beach's parkland. Video footage showed them mostly interacting in small groups, distanced from others, though some danced in close proximity with each other.

This event has been denounced for the past four days, with media outlets and politicians vying to outdo one another with their exaggerated rhetoric. Immigration Minister Alex Hawke declared that the federal government would seek to identify people involved and cancel temporary visas, to allow for deportations.

The hypocrisy of all this was demonstrated the day after the Bronte beach party when thousands of people were encouraged to cram into shopping centres for the Boxing Day sales. People not wearing masks spent hours in poorly ventilated, indoor shopping centres. Berejiklian had urged people not to attend the sales only in the Sydney CBD, tacitly promoting suburban

centres.

In the face of official indifference and neglect, the working class needs to organise its own response to the pandemic. If the current Sydney clusters continue to spread, workers will need to organise rank-and-file safety committees in their workplaces and action committees in their localities to independently organise the necessary measures to preserve public health.



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