

Australian government negligence threatens large-scale COVID-19 outbreak

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The latest coronavirus wave continues to grow in Australia's two largest cities, Sydney and Melbourne.

After the first of these cases were detected in eastern Sydney in mid-December, each day has seen announcements of new clusters and infection sites. There are now 36 active cases in Victoria and 190 in New South Wales. While these numbers are low compared to the mass infections ravaging the United States, Europe, and other regions, there are indications that the infection spread is on an exponential trajectory. New cases are emerging more quickly than during the previous waves in 2020.

In Melbourne, there are more than 20 exposure sites, mostly in the city's eastern suburbs but also including the central business district. Sydney remains the epicentre of the latest outbreak. Genomic testing has indicated there are several different transmission chains, with identified clusters in the Northern Beaches area, the western-Sydney suburbs of Croydon and Berala, and the regional city of Wollongong.

The Berala cluster, now with 15 confirmed cases, may be the most threatening. According to epidemiologists, the source was a returning overseas traveller, who infected a patient transport driver while en route to hotel quarantine. This infection again points to the inadequate provision of personal protective equipment (PPE) for health and other emergency workers.

A close contact of the driver then unknowingly infected two workers at a BWS bottle shop. These workers, who worked shifts every day between December 22 and December 31, subsequently spread the virus to multiple customers. An estimated 1,000 people were in the shop on New Year's Eve alone. The thousands of people who entered the store over the 10-day period have been asked to self-isolate for two

weeks, regardless of test results.

Whereas the initial Sydney outbreak was concentrated in the city's affluent Northern Beaches area, Berala is a largely working-class suburb. About 60 percent of people there are immigrants and a significant proportion are manufacturing workers.

Experience in Australia and internationally demonstrates that the coronavirus pandemic is particularly dangerous in working-class areas. As a consequence of decades of "free market" and pro-business measures, enacted by successive Labor and Liberal governments, workers often have multiple jobs, have little or no sick leave, live in larger households to save on rental payments, and can have inadequate access to high quality healthcare.

Sewerage tests have detected traces of coronavirus at treatment plants in Liverpool and Glenfield, also working-class suburbs in Sydney's south-west, indicating an infection spread uncontained by contact tracing measures.

In the face of this major public health threat, the response of state and federal governments, Labor and Liberal, amounts to criminal negligence.

The state Labor government in Victoria has again been exposed for failing to make the necessary investment in public health infrastructure. An estimated 60,000 people holidaying in New South Wales during the Christmas period were told to return home before the border was closed on January 2, and to be tested within 24 hours. This has triggered a debacle over the past three days, as it immediately became evident that the government had not prepared the necessary facilities to conduct so many tests.

Cars queued for as long as nine hours at testing stations. Many locations turned people away on multiple days, while those who do not own a car were

told they could not be tested at all. Only 22,000 tests were conducted on Saturday and 32,000 on Sunday, with some reports indicating lengthy delays in obtaining test results.

Some test centres may have increased the risks of infection spread. Steve Williamson, who returned to Melbourne from Queensland, told the ABC that he had holidayed in an area with no coronavirus cases. When, however, he complied with the demand to get tested on return, he had to wait in an undercover and walled area at Sunshine Hospital with around 60 other people, some of whom had symptoms. Williamson said he was concerned that the testing system “could exacerbate the problem instead of containing it.”

In New South Wales (NSW), the state Liberal government, backed by the federal government of Prime Minister Scott Morrison, has ignored multiple warnings issued by epidemiologists and medical experts.

The government resisted mandating the wearing of masks until yesterday. This backflip followed a sharp condemnation of the government from the Australian Medical Association. The group’s vice president, Dr Chris Moy, said refusing to mandate masks was “a pretty ridiculous decision [that] doesn’t make sense.”

Other basic precautions are still not being enacted. Large gatherings continue to be permitted. An indoor concert by the group Human Nature was held in Rooty Hill, an outer-western Sydney suburb, on Saturday night, with 1,200 people, mostly unmasked, singing along. Outdoor gatherings of as many as 2,000 people remain permitted, with exemptions allowing even larger events. The government insists that a five-day cricket test match, between Australia and India, will proceed as planned beginning Thursday, in front of more than 20,000 people each day.

Raina MacIntyre, head of the biosecurity research program at the University of NSW’s Kirby Institute, characterised the cricket match, together with Christmas and New Year’s Eve, as a “trifecta of super-spreading events.” She told the *Australian Financial Review*: “If we don’t have it down to zero transmission by Australia Day [January 26], then we are in for prolonged pain.”

The NSW government has openly declared its commitment to protecting the interests of big business, as it refuses to consider more sweeping measures,

including locking down Sydney, to eliminate the virus.

Berejiklian explained that the mandatory mask order was aimed at avoiding any measures that “restrict business activity, jobs or economic activity.” She defended the test cricket potential super-spreader event on the basis that people should “consider the thousands of jobs it keeps, consider the sense of normality it gives us.”

The premier’s references to “jobs” are properly translated as “profits.” As for “normality,” the government is attempting to condition the working class to accepting an ongoing risk of contracting COVID-19 in their workplace or while travelling to work.

Confronted with the threat of a mass outbreak, workers need to build their own independent rank-and-file safety committees in every workplace, to develop a fight for safe working conditions and the imposition of the necessary public health measures to eliminate the spread of coronavirus.



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