

Australia hit by more infectious coronavirus strains, B117

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More infectious strains of coronavirus have reached Australia, including the B117 variant that was first detected in Britain.

Brisbane, Australia's third largest city, was placed under a three-day lockdown, from last Friday to 6 p.m. today, after a positive test for the B117 strain was confirmed for a cleaner who had been working at a hotel for quarantined people returning from overseas. The case represented yet another failure of the hotel quarantine system.

Failures to enact basic preventive measures, such as the proper provision of personal protective equipment (PPE), have triggered multiple COVID-19 clusters spilling out of several states' quarantine hotels and into the population.

The Brisbane lockdown demonstrated some of the calculations being made within Australian ruling circles in the face of the now even deadlier coronavirus threat.

When the global pandemic first emerged last year, state and federal governments initially opted for a "suppression" strategy, based on managing a supposedly steady level of infection. Labor and Liberal leaders rejected an elimination strategy, on the explicit basis that this would prove too costly for corporate interests. The criminally negligent approach saw the premature lifting of initial restrictions, leading to the "second wave" in Melbourne.

The B117 variant, which has engulfed Britain in the past weeks and reportedly is 1.7 times as contagious as other strains, poses an even greater danger. Similarly infectious strains, including one from South Africa, have also been detected. Despite this, state and federal governments are continuing to resist imposing preventive measures that impinge on profit-generating business activities.

The three-day Brisbane lockdown was held over the

weekend to limit even minimal adverse effects for corporate retailers, construction companies, and other business interests. Coronavirus has a 14-day incubation period, yet the Queensland state Labor government of Premier Anastasia Palaszczuk has insisted that a lockdown covering this period was not necessary. The premier today announced that only minimal mask wearing and indoor venue capacity restrictions would be in place for the next 10 days.

Whether these limited measures will prove effective remains to be seen. There were no additional coronavirus infections detected since Saturday, but this is from daily test numbers below 20,000, a small fraction of greater Brisbane's population of 2.4 million.

The state Liberal government in New South Wales is taking a similarly complacent approach. Premier Gladys Berejiklian yesterday lifted a very limited local lockdown in the Northern Beaches area, the site of a significant cluster of infections that emerged in mid-December. The premier declared that "the main threat has to some extent subsided" and that "we're still mopping up."

The state government is covering up the reality that significant community transmission of COVID-19 may be underway in Sydney's working-class western suburbs.

Another positive case was registered on Saturday in a patient at Mt Druitt Hospital. The facility's emergency department was subsequently closed for cleaning, with ambulances diverted to other hospitals. The case remains under investigation, with a connection to a known cluster yet to be established. A cluster tied to a bottle shop in the suburb of Berala has now been linked to 26 infections, of which 3 were reported today. There are numerous exposure sites across the western suburbs, including for multiple shops in Bankstown

Central Shopping Centre across two days.

Another demonstration of official negligence came with the *Daily Telegraph*'s publication of photographs of private security guards without any PPE in one of Sydney's hotel quarantine sites. A woman arriving from New York for a mandatory 14-day quarantine at the InterContinental hotel captured images of the man sitting in the corridor outside her room without a mask or any other protections. The guard reportedly said that he did not need a mask if he kept 1.5 metres away from quarantined guests. This is contrary to scientists' understanding of how coronavirus is easily transmitted via aerosols within enclosed indoor spaces.

Nearly twelve months into the global pandemic, the failure of state and federal governments to enact the most basic of precautions continues to be exposed.

Measures agreed to at a meeting on Friday of the national cabinet—the de facto national unity administration of Prime Minister Scott Morrison and the Labor and Liberal state premiers—ought to have been put in place months ago. Only now will people returning to Australia from overseas receive a coronavirus test before travelling, and then be required to wear a mask on the airplane. Similarly, only now will workers in quarantine hotels receive daily virus tests.

The national cabinet also cut in half the number of people allowed to return to Australia. This measure will adversely affect thousands of Australian citizens working and studying overseas, many of whom have been trying for months to return home but have confronted exorbitant airline charges and limited quotas for returnees. The national cabinet announced no additional financial or other support for stranded people overseas.

Morrison was keen to use the national cabinet meeting to promote a changed mass vaccination schedule. The government had previously insisted that vaccines would first be released in March, due to local safety approval procedures, making Australia among the last of all advanced capitalist countries to begin using coronavirus vaccine.

This will now be brought forward to mid-February, Morrison announced last Thursday. The prime minister explained that he anticipated that the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine would be approved by the end of January. The government has purchased 10 million doses of this

vaccine, for the inoculation of up to 5 million people, with 54 million doses of the University of Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine purchased for later deployment.

The about-face on the vaccine schedule points to growing fears within the government of escalating hostility within the working class. Coming immediately after the national bushfire disaster last year, the coronavirus pandemic has exposed the entire political establishment and its prioritising the accumulation of corporate profits over public health and safety.



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