

Australian Tennis Open proceeds despite growing COVID-19 infections

Mike Head
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The staging of this year's Australian Open tennis tournament in Melbourne in the midst of the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic has become a naked demonstration of the subordination of public health and every other aspect of life, including sport, to the profit-driven dictates of the wealthy corporate elite.

"Profits before lives" is literally the theme under which the global season-opening event is taking place. The Victorian state Labor Party government is helping more than 1,200 international tennis players, their support staff and broadcasters fly into the country on special charter flights for next month's slightly delayed competition, and is allowing them to forgo normal quarantine requirements. This is despite growing numbers of the participants testing positive to COVID-19, which may include the more infectious variants that first came to light in Britain.

So dangerous is this operation, with planes arriving from the US, Europe and other heavily-infected regions, that positive virus tests have been confirmed on at least three charter flights so far. This has resulted in 170 of the passengers, including 72 players, being placed in "hard quarantine" in hotels for 14 days, unable to practice on courts.

The test results from another 13 charter flights are yet to be announced, but Tennis Australia is refusing to call off the tournament or even delay the scheduled February 8 start.

By contrast, an estimated 40,000 ordinary Australian citizens face endless delays getting back home, often stuck in severely infected countries, because of government indifference, caps on arrivals and a failure to organise adequate quarantine facilities.

In a desperate public relations exercise to counter mounting public outrage over this disparity, the federal Liberal-National Coalition government yesterday announced it would charter 20 flights to enable some stranded people to get back to Australia. No details have yet been released as to when and where these arrangements will be made.

The chasm between the trapped people and their families, and the treatment of the participants in the Open, which is

the biggest single money-spinner of all Australia's sporting events, is part of the widening social and class divide produced by the official response to the global pandemic.

While the Open may generate vast revenues for Tennis Australia, television broadcasters, advertisers and tourism companies, the economic crisis, mass unemployment and poverty fuelled by the worsening international COVID-19 catastrophe will intensify.

The readiness of governments to risk the health, wellbeing and lives of the population is highlighted by the continuing coronavirus outbreaks occurring in Australia, including of the new mutant variants. Yesterday, for example, six new "community transmission" cases were reported in Sydney, including a Concord Repatriation Hospital worker, despite low testing levels, as well as three more in quarantine hotels.

Seeking to justify his government's decision to proceed with the Open, Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews baldly pointed to the domination of corporate interests. He said other countries would have pounced on the billion-dollar tournament if it did not go ahead, and Australia could have lost the hosting rights altogether.

"If the Australian Open does not happen in Melbourne, it will happen somewhere else," Andrews said on Thursday. "It will happen in Japan, it will happen in China, it will happen in Singapore," he said, adding an anti-Asian twist. "The real risk then is, it doesn't come back."

Without providing any substantiation, Andrews said the Open supports more than a quarter of a million "Victorian jobs." The vast majority of jobs attached to the annual tournament would be temporary and low-paid.

Andrews added that the government and taxpayers needed a return on the \$1.5 billion invested in building the Melbourne Park tournament facility over a 10-year period. That only underscores the magnitude of the government subsidies handed to such enterprises.

Likewise, governments are facilitating other major corporate-sponsored sports events, such as international cricket matches and football seasons, which are being held before tens of thousands of people in partly-filled stadiums.

These spectacles are integral to a further escalation of the “return to work” drive being mounted by big business, governments and the media despite the dangers presented by the escape into the community of the new COVID-19 strains.

Last Saturday’s editorial in the *Australian*, a flagship of the Murdoch media, was typical. It was headlined: “Recovery gathers pace as nation heads back to work.” Enthusiastically, it highlighted plans by governments and employers to require up to half their office staff to return to central city office blocks this week.

Today, the newspaper welcomed news that “hundreds of thousands of university students are set to head back to campus for in-person classes,” with “most Australian universities” planning to bring back face-to-face tutorials from next month.

Saturday’s *Australian* editorial also congratulated Andrews—whom the newspaper previously denounced over limited lockdowns in Victoria—for planning to ask the bipartisan “national cabinet” to allow international students to re-enter the state, exempt from the current quotas for international arrivals. This is a bid to restore the profitability of the universities, which depend heavily on the exorbitant fees they charge overseas students, again at the potential expense of public health. Such students “are ready to pay up,” the editorial enthused.

A vaccination “blueprint” handed to the federal government by the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ACCI) seeks to prioritise business people and workers in key economic sectors for inoculation, ahead of the general population, supposedly following the vaccination of the elderly, indigenous people and frontline at-risk workers.

In other words, corporate executives and those workers whose labour they deem “essential” to their operations would be offered vaccine protection, while the rest of the population remained exposed to the deadly virus. “In order to develop new markets, those in business must be able to travel to different regions to establish new business ties,” the ACCI said.

For all the claims of “recovery gaining pace,” the ruling class is exploiting the pandemic to deepen its decades-long offensive against the jobs, wages and conditions of workers, aided and abetted by the trade unions.

The massive levels of joblessness triggered by the public health crisis, and the failure of corporate-dominated governments to implement the necessary safety and financial support measures, are being used as battering rams in this drive.

As estimated by the latest available survey by the Roy Morgan polling company, 20 percent of the workforce was

unemployed or “under-employed” as of November. That represents about three million workers. More than a million more depend on their wages being subsidised by the government’s JobKeeper scheme, which is being terminated in March. At the same time, the government has slashed JobSeeker dole payments to \$50 a day, and state and territory government mortgage and rental default moratoria will end by March.

Recent comments to media outlets, compiled by the Australian Council of Social Services (ACOSS), give some idea of the resulting anger. Bane Williams wrote in the *Sydney Morning Herald* that he would once again have to “worry every day about what I should eat, or if I would even eat at all.”

Cliff Fraser told Nine News: “I’m not ready to retire, but I feel like I’ve been thrown on the scrap heap.” Caryn Ryan told the *Guardian* people “can’t survive, let alone live” on such payment levels. She told the 7 network’s “Sunrise” that she had applied for more than 800 jobs, resulting in just three interviews and no job offers.

Rita McDonald explained to Australian Broadcasting Corporation outlets she had not been able to “eat properly or take my medications” on the pre-COVID dole rate. She feared that, “we’ll be thrown back into that poverty trap.”

ACOSS has called for JobSeeker to be increased to at least \$65 per day, but that would only “bring payment levels in line with poverty line levels.”

From the outset of the pandemic, a year ago, the Socialist Equality Party has warned of the price to be paid in human suffering for the corporate drive to overturn basic safety requirements. We have urged the formation of rank-and-file workplace committees to fight for crucial measures such as the closure of classrooms and non-essential industries, and the provision of income support for all affected workers and small business people, to be paid for from the vast wealth accumulated by the rich.



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