Australian governments lift safety restrictions despite COVID-19 dangers and vaccine doubts

Martin Scott
27 January 2021

Australian governments are continuing to scrap health and safety restrictions and promote the back-to-workplaces drive of big business, rather than maintain even limited measures to curb further COVID-19 outbreaks before the population can be immunised on a broad scale.

No vaccinations have yet occurred in Australia, and fresh doubts exist about the availability, timing and efficacy of the vaccines ordered by the federal government. Clear dangers still exist that more infections will escape from hotel quarantines for international arrivals, including cases of the more infectious mutant variants spreading around the globe.

As part of a wave of restriction-lifting by state and territory governments, New South Wales (NSW) Premier Gladys Berejiklian announced on Tuesday that rules in Greater Sydney would be eased from midnight Thursday. The relaxation comes despite NSW Chief Health Officer Kerry Chant's admission that it was "too premature to say" that community transmission of the virus has been eliminated in the state.

The source of a family COVID-19 cluster in western Sydney remains unknown, and sewage surveillance at a Liverpool treatment plant indicates that undetected community transmission is occurring in the city's southwest.

Under the relaxed measures, 30 people can gather inside a household, 50 people can gather outdoors, and up to 300 guests can attend weddings and funerals. All other venues will be subject to a four square metre rule, with no cap on numbers. Masks will no longer be mandatory in supermarkets and shopping centres, although they will still be required for public transport passengers and front-of-house hospitality workers.

Berejiklian made clear that the public transport mask mandate was bound up with efforts to force office workers back into their employers' buildings, including in Sydney's central business district. "One of the reasons we are requiring people to wear a mask on public transport is to encourage people to come back to work," she said.

Even during the period of tightest restrictions in Sydney, public health was subordinated to corporate profits, most notably in the decision to proceed with a lucrative televised cricket test match at the Sydney Cricket Ground in front of 10,000 spectators.

No such exemption was made for an "Invasion Day" protest, marking the anniversary of British colonisation, held in Sydney's Domain on Tuesday. The seated outdoor event proceeded with the 3,000 attendees forced to congregate in smaller groups, and police did not allow the protesters to march. Five people were arrested.

In another profit-driven decision, Victoria's Labor Party government is still allowing the multi-billion dollar Australian Open tennis tournament to proceed next month in Melbourne although at least nine of the more than 1,200 players, broadcasters and support staff flown in to the country on chartered aircraft have tested positive for COVID-19.

Remaining border restrictions between states are being lifted, in a bid to promote travel and unhindered business operations. This morning, Queensland Labor Premier Annastacia Palaszczuk announced that her government will fully open the state's border with New South Wales from February 1. If there are further outbreaks, significant inter-state travel poses the risk of a rapid spread of the virus across the country.

Governments across the country, both Labor Party and Liberal-National Coalition, are hailing the beginning of the 2021 school year as a "return to normalcy," regardless

© World Socialist Web Site

of the ongoing global pandemic. In NSW, students, staff and parents will not be required to wear masks, and sporting carnivals, excursions, overnight camps, and concerts will be permitted. In Victoria, drinking fountains will again be allowed, and no social distancing measures will be in place, although masks are "recommended" for older students.

The Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) announced on Monday its provisional approval of the Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine. Australia has ordered 10 million doses of the vaccine, but the first batch of 80,000 doses will not arrive until late next month at the earliest. The company has experienced significant delays in delivering its vaccine around the world, triggering conflicts with competing national governments over its broken supply contracts.

Under the federal government's plans, most people will receive a different vaccine, developed by AstraZeneca and produced domestically by medical biotech firm CSL. The country is supposed to receive 53.8 million doses of this vaccine, which the TGA has not yet approved.

No explanation has been offered for the delay in rolling out the vaccines. On Monday, after weeks of promoting the notion that vaccines would enable a full economic reopening, Prime Minister Scott Morrison downplayed hopes in the vaccine rollout. "It's not a silver bullet because there are still limitations to what these vaccines can do," he said.

It is still unclear whether the vaccines will prevent transmission of the coronavirus or merely stop those who are infected from developing symptoms. Federal Health Department secretary Brendan Murphy said on Monday: "Probably within three months we will have pretty good data on how effective the vaccines are at preventing transmission and that will give us the potential to re-evaluate things like international travel and hotel quarantine."

There is also an open question around the impact of new strains of COVID-19 on the planned vaccination program. The B.1.1.7 mutation, sometimes called the "UK variant," appears to be significantly more communicable, and possibly more deadly, than earlier strains.

Another variant—501Y.V2 or B.1.351—most prolific in Africa, but also present in Europe, Asia, North America, Australia and New Zealand, not only appears to be more contagious than previous strains, but has also been found in initial studies to reduce antibody levels in patients who have received vaccinations or been previously infected.

These new strains are the result of the criminal "herd immunity" policies of capitalist governments around the world. All viruses mutate, certainly, but the insistence that the wheels of industry continue to turn amid the raging pandemic has turned the world's factories, schools, offices, and shopping centres into petri dishes fostering the development of new variants.

The genetic variations in the B.1.1.7 strain do not directly reduce the efficacy of the existing vaccines, but its greater contagiousness means a higher level of immunity among the population is required to stamp it out.

This presents a particular problem for the AstraZeneca vaccine. The company released trial results late last year showing the vaccine to be effective in only 70 percent of cases, not enough to eliminate the virus even as the vaccination rate approaches 100 percent.

A limited number of participants in the Astra Zeneca trial who initially received a half dose, rather than two full doses, fared better, with the vaccine showing an efficacy of 90 percent. While this may be a promising development, it points to the complexity of delivering the vaccine correctly to the entire population.

Quarantine and border workers, frontline health workers, and staff and residents in aged care will be the first to receive the vaccine according to the federal government's "national roll-out strategy."

While teachers, retail staff and warehouse, construction and fast food workers were considered "essential" when that designation was necessary to keep schools and businesses open during lockdowns, they will not receive early vaccinations.

Such is the callous and ruthless attitude of big business and government to the health of the working class, as has been demonstrated throughout the pandemic.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site