

Australian government promises “cheap flights” to deflect social unrest over mass unemployment and vaccine debacles

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Amid a mounting political crisis over its cutting off of wage subsidy and welfare payments, plus its slow and disorganised COVID-19 vaccine program, along with the danger of fresh infection breakouts, the Liberal-National government this week promoted another \$1.2 billion handout to the airline companies, supposedly to provide half-price flights to tourism destinations.

An air of desperation hung over Prime Minister Scott Morrison’s announcement on Thursday. It came as he repudiated his previous promises that the entire population of 25 million people would be vaccinated by October, thus throwing into doubt his claims that this would allow a return to “more normal” business, including the lifting of international border restrictions.

Every element of the airline package is misleading. Only an estimated \$72 million of the \$1.2 billion package will go to subsidising the promised 800,000 lower-priced tickets. The rest will boost the coffers of the airlines, in the hope of preventing them immediately laying off 6,800 more workers, on top of the thousands they have retrenched over the past year.

As well as being placed under pressure by the corporate media over a series of sexual assault allegations, the government is facing increasing popular hostility over the reality that the scrapping of its JobKeeper wage subsidy scheme on March 28, accompanied by the abolition of a meagre Coronavirus Supplement on dole and welfare benefits, will leave millions of workers jobless or under-employed, and living in dire poverty.

The risk of further COVID-19 outbreaks was highlighted yesterday by the announcement of a still-unexplained infection of a doctor at Brisbane’s Princess Alexandra (PA) Hospital. The PA, one of the

city’s biggest hospitals, is on the frontline of treating infections from the quarantine hotels for arriving international travellers.

The developments at the more than 1,000-bed PA again show how quickly the pandemic can erupt, under conditions in which basic safety precautions—even as elementary as mask-wearing in public hospitals—are brushed aside by governments and health authorities.

The PA was placed on lockdown yesterday, and mask-wearing reinstated, after it was reported that the infected doctor had contact with two COVID-positive patients at the hospital in the early hours of Wednesday. She was infectious while in the community the following day. The identified “high-risk” locations include a café, gym and hotel, as well as the hospital itself.

Heightening the dangers, the two infected patients have contracted the more transmissible and potentially deadly UK variant of the coronavirus. They are among 42 COVID-19 cases currently in quarantine in the state of Queensland.

At a media conference this morning, the state Labor government announced limits on visits to hospitals, aged care facilities, disability services and prisons in the Brisbane region, but took no further safety measures to protect the population. Premier Annastacia Palaszczuk even declared there was no need for people to wear masks.

Instead of any precautionary lockdown of the city, Palaszczuk said the next 72 hours would be “critical” to see if the infections spread further. She said contact tracing was underway to try to identify and contact all patients, staff and families who may have been exposed. She claimed that because the doctor had been

infectious in the community for only a “short period,” this breakout was different to one involving the UK variant in January, which led to a three-day Brisbane lockdown.

State Health Minister Yvette D’Ath implored Brisbane residents to get tested for COVID-19 if they experienced symptoms, but said they would need to expect “long lines” at testing sites.

The latest airline bailout—Qantas and Virgin received \$715 million from the Morrison government last year—will do nothing to stop the expected broader elimination of tens of thousands more workers’ jobs across the tourism industry, as well as throughout the rest of the economy, when JobKeeper ends on March 28.

Far beyond the touted benefit to the 13 tourism destinations hand-picked for the cut-price tickets, the “cheap flights” are intended to bolster big business demands for an end to all pandemic lockdowns, border closures and other safety measures.

The government, airline chiefs and corporate media proprietors are hoping that people will rush to buy discounted tickets, assisting the profit-driven push to insist that no more measures be taken by state and territory governments that could obstruct the full “reopening” of the economy.

Morrison told a media conference yesterday: “Now, of course, of course, we want to see the domestic borders remain open and ... we would expect premiers to want the flow of this benefit into their states.”

As the *Australian Financial Review* political editor Phillip Coorey wrote today, the scheme amounts to a “border bribe:” “The tacit message in the great air ticket cash splash is that state premiers will now close borders at their own peril.”

Coorey drew the connection to this week’s business summit hosted by the newspaper, where Morrison “backed by others, argued a change of mindset from the states was crucial to the economic recovery... Put bluntly, as the vaccines are rolled out and the most vulnerable are protected, the health risk abates.”

But the vaccine “rollout” is fast becoming a disaster. In January, the Morrison government said it would have 4 million vulnerable people vaccinated by early April. So far, however, only around 150,000 people have been vaccinated.

While portrayed as motivated by the need to protect

lives, the government’s vaccine pledges are the spearhead of a corporate “reopening” drive. At Thursday’s airline bailout announcement, Morrison again claimed that the vaccine rollout would meet the October target, allowing the reopening of the country’s international borders by then. “That’s our hope and that’s our expectation,” he said.

Yesterday, journalists challenged Morrison on his broken pledges. The prime minister had just told a media scrum that the government’s October target only referred to the first dose of vaccines. This effectively postponed the deadline by at least 12 weeks, until 2022.

One reporter asked: “Yesterday, you said everyone would be vaccinated by October and you said that on television. Today you are now saying that they’re not?” Morrison claimed he had been “misunderstood” because “the first doses will be administered by the end of October—that’s what I meant.”

Morrison blamed the delay on a decision by Italy and the European Union to block 250,000 AstraZeneca doses from being exported to Australia. At the same time, he said he had no concerns whatsoever about using the AstraZeneca coronavirus vaccine, after some European and other countries paused their rollouts, amid reports of people developing potentially fatal blood clots after their injections.

Echoing the financial elite, the opposition Labor Party has criticised the delay from the standpoint of private profit. Shadow cabinet minister Jason Clare complained yesterday: “We’re not going to get the economy revving at full speed again. We’re not going to be able to open up international borders, and get tourists in from around the world, until we get everybody vaccinated.”

Labor’s pro-business response continues its essential unity—along with the trade unions, the corporate elite and Morrison’s Coalition government—throughout the pandemic. This has included backing the cutting of jobs and conditions to help employers restructure their operations at the direct expense of the working class.



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