Another Australian capital city COVID outbreak highlights danger of global pandemic

Mike Head
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The latest COVID-19 crisis in the Western Australian (WA) state capital of Perth has shown how vulnerable Australia, like the rest of the world, is to the more infectious variants now ravaging entire countries, and how quickly infections could spread across the continent.

Premier Mark McGowan's state Labor Party government yesterday ended a three-day partial lockdown of the city, despite a still unknown number of infections from an outbreak that spread from a defective quarantine hotel for returned travellers.

McGowan told a media conference that only about half the more than 1,100 close or casual contacts of infected people tested had so far received negative results. Nevertheless, schools, workplaces and other venues, including restaurants, pubs and cafes, would reopen. For the next four days, masks would remain mandatory, except for primary school students.

The state government had been forced to announce a three-day shutdown last Friday after it was revealed that three people, including a pregnant mother and her four-year-old girl, had contracted COVID-19 while in hotel quarantine, from a returned traveller from India.

Among those infected was a Victorian man who spent five days in Perth before flying to Melbourne, on the other side of the continent, on April 21, where he tested positive.

The virus strain involved has been identified as the UK variant, one of the mutations that have spiralled out of control in India, resulting in catastrophic levels of infections and deaths.

Until now, the coronavirus has remained at low levels in Australia since a "second wave" killed more than 700 people last May to October, but this is the second outbreak in Perth this year. There have been outbreaks also in recent months in every other mainland state capital—Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane and Adelaide—including of highly-contagious variants.

The current Perth outbreak shows that the danger is increasing, essentially because of the profit-driven policies of federal and state governments, like those of capitalist governments internationally.

Intent on getting all workers back on the job to generate corporate revenues, the federal Liberal-National Coalition government and its state and territory counterparts, mostly run by the opposition Labor Party, have conducted a premature rush to lift all basic safety precautions in order to fully reopen the economy.

At the same time, they have presided over the failure of the quarantine system based on private hotels, and the shambles of the vaccination program. The population is now not expected to be sufficiently inoculated until next year at least, like billions of other people globally.

Even Perth's limited shutdown incurred the wrath of the corporate media. Without waiting to see how many people became infected, the Murdoch media flagship the *Australian* immediately denounced it last Saturday as a "crazy COVID panic" and a "fresh economic blow."

Despite a still unknown number of infections in Perth and Melbourne, governments encouraged people to gather and march in Anzac Day war commemorations around Australia on Sunday, and a crowd of 78,103 was permitted at a football game in Melbourne. This was proclaimed as a world record attendance at a sporting event since the pandemic was declared in March 2020.

Apart from the promotion of militarism and the lucrative interests involved in professional sports, such events are intended to create an atmosphere of a return to "normality"—irresponsibly sowing complacency and confusion about the pandemic.

In Victoria, the state Labor government took no general

safety measures, even though 241 passengers flew on the same plane as the infected man. More than 1,000 other people recently arrived from WA, and testing and contact tracing remains incomplete. Potentially infected people have been simply asked to self-quarantine.

The three people initially infected in Perth were in quarantine at the city's Mercure hotel, despite earlier warnings by health authorities to the state government that there was a high risk of the virus spreading from room to room because of its ventilation system.

The outbreak then infected two Perth residents who were never in hotel quarantine. One was a female friend with whom the infected man stayed in Perth, while the other person visited a restaurant the infected man and woman also visited.

How quickly the coronavirus can spread was highlighted by the state government's long list of exposure sites across Perth, which includes a childcare centre, numerous restaurants and retail outlets, chemists, leisure centres and the city's airport.

Moreover, the government did not commence the lockdown until Saturday morning, allowing tens of thousands of people to leave the city, mostly to the state's southern coastal areas, potentially spreading the virus.

WA's chief health officer, Andy Robertson, had recommended that Mercure Hotel no longer be used for quarantine as far back as April 16 after an investigation found air pressure issues in the rooms caused "leakage" into the corridors.

Ventilation testing at all 10 quarantine hotels in Perth was part of a review of the quarantine system that followed a five-day city lockdown in January after a security guard contracted the virus. At that time, the state government had not even required guards to wear masks.

McGowan said the Mercure would not be used to quarantine people returning from overseas in the future. However, his government still plans to use it to quarantine seasonal workers from countries such as Tonga and Vanuatu, who are being exploited as cheap labour by agricultural companies.

Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) medical commentator Dr. Norman Swan condemned "another failure of hotel quarantine." He said: "It's no mystery. Airborne spread can occur because the rooms aren't designed for negative pressure."

Australian Medical Association WA president Andrew Miller said the federal and state governments were "grossly negligent" because hotel quarantine was not "fit for purpose." He told ABC radio: "You need to urgently,

urgently change it and to start building as quickly as possible air-gapped facilities." Pointing to a glaring contrast, Miller told Today: "We put up mining camps in a matter of months to run a mine."

In a bid to shield themselves from responsibility for the crisis, the federal and state governments have engaged in acrimonious blame-shifting. McGowan demanded that Prime Minister Scott Morrison's government establish dedicated quarantine facilities.

However, Defence Minister Peter Dutton, taking an increasingly prominent role, declared that immigration detention and military facilities were not suitable and that the states agreed to the hotel quarantine scheme.

Morrison had previously foreshadowed a shift to "home quarantine," which would only increase the danger of infections spreading throughout society.

McGowan also insisted that the Morrison government halve the number of overseas arrivals into Perth. Yet that worsens the plight of about 40,000 Australian citizens stranded overseas who have registered to try to get flights back.

Last week, amid growing public discontent over the vaccine debacle, Morrison suddenly called twice-weekly meetings of the unelected "National Cabinet" of federal, state and territory leaders—a virtual bipartisan coalition government, in which Labor leaders form the majority.

Morrison's move underscores the dependence of the ruling elite on the Labor Party and its affiliated trade unions to isolate, stifle and suppress workers' struggles against the mounting COVID-19 threat to public health and lives, and the use of the pandemic to slash workers' jobs, wages and conditions.

Federal Labor leader Anthony Albanese has provided "constructive" support to the Liberal-National government throughout the COVID-19 disaster. He maintained that stance on Sunday. "We really need the government to get its act together to make sure that, particularly those who are vulnerable, get the vaccine they need," he told reporters after attending an Anzac ceremony in Sydney.

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