

Australia: Victorian state government announces lockdown amid outbreak of Indian COVID variant

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The Labor government in Victoria this morning announced the imposition of a seven-day lockdown across Australia's second most populous state, amid a rapid spread of the highly-contagious Indian variant of COVID-19 centred in Melbourne but extending into regional and rural areas.

The outbreak is still in its initial stages. However it has already underscored Australia's vulnerability to a major surge of the coronavirus. For months, Labor and Liberal-National governments, together with the corporate media, have falsely claimed that the country has escaped the coronavirus crisis and presented the pandemic as a thing of the past.

Restrictions on mass sporting events, large indoor gatherings and almost all businesses that could serve as large infection points have been lifted. The state and federal governments have refused to develop safe, purpose-built quarantine facilities, and Australia's vaccine rollout is among the slowest of any developed country. The consequence is that any infections pose the danger of a rapid and unchecked spread of the disease.

The Victorian outbreak only came to light on Monday, when state authorities reported two cases in Melbourne. On Tuesday, two further infections were announced, followed by nine on Wednesday and 12 this morning, bringing the total to 27 confirmed cases. One of those stricken by the virus is in a hospital intensive care unit.

While the numbers are low, acting Victorian Labor Premier James Merlino's statement announcing the lockdown this morning indicated the speed at which the virus is moving.

Merlino said that there are now more than 150 potential exposure sites across Victoria, up from a couple of dozen a day ago, and 80 last night. They include the Melbourne Cricket Ground, where an infected person attended an Australian Rules football match with 26,000 other spectators, along with scores of cafes, restaurants, bars and nightclubs. Melbourne's other main football stadium, Docklands, is also on the list.

The initial exposure sites presented at the beginning of the week were mainly confined to a handful of suburbs in Melbourne's north. They have since expanded to include suburbs across the city of more than five million, along with regional centres, such as Bendigo.

Merlino stated that contact tracers have identified more than 10,000 primary and secondary contacts of infected people, who have potentially been exposed to the virus. The outbreak patient zero is believed to have contracted COVID at least 10 days before he tested positive, meaning that the number of contacts could be even higher.

Merlino touted the state's contact-tracing team, but conceded that the virus was spreading more rapidly than was being tracked, circulating at the fastest speed Victoria has "ever seen." While in previous outbreaks, it had often taken five or six days for infected people to begin displaying symptoms, in the current cases that gap had narrowed to a day or two, heightening the risk of further transmission.

The b 1.617 or so-called Indian variant of the coronavirus is up to 50 percent more contagious than an earlier British mutation, which itself had far higher rates of transmission than the original iteration of COVID-19. The b 1.617 strain has laid waste to India, where hundreds of thousands of infections every day since early last month have overwhelmed the hospital system and resulted in mass deaths.

The surge of the virus throughout the Asia-Pacific region, including in states such as Taiwan and Singapore which had previously suppressed COVID-19, has further underscored the virulence of b 1.617.

Because authorities had previously lifted restrictions on inter-state travel, only reinstituting travel bans to and from Victoria last night and this morning, it is possible that the variant is now present elsewhere in the country.

In his announcement this morning, Merlino presented Victoria's lockdown as an unavoidable circuit-breaker that was necessary to prevent a mass outbreak. In keeping with the protracted campaign by the ruling elite for an end to such measures, the Labor government held off on the lockdown for several days, even as it was clear that the virus was circulating widely.

The lockdown includes an indoor and outdoor mask mandate; a suspension of in-person teaching at schools and universities, except for the children of essential workers and those deemed vulnerable; a ban on public gatherings; and the restriction of

service at cafes, restaurants and non-essential retail to takeaway service only.

As in previous lockdowns, many workplaces will remain open. This includes the construction sector which have been deemed as “essential” throughout the pandemic, as a means of ensuring the fortunes of property developers and an ongoing speculative boom in the housing market. Most factories will also continue operations, including the meatworks, a source of major outbreaks in earlier lockdowns.

In his announcement, Merlino took a thinly-veiled jab at the federal Liberal-National government, declaring that Victoria would likely not be in its current predicament, “if more people were vaccinated” and there was an “alternative to the Commonwealth’s hotel quarantines.”

Genomic sequencing has traced the outbreak to a man who quarantined in South Australia, before testing positive on his return to Victoria last month. South Australian authorities have now acknowledged that the man contracted the virus inside the quarantine, likely when he and an occupant of a nearby room opened their doors at the same time to receive supplies.

In South Australia, as in most states, the private hotels used as quarantines have hardly any protections against airborne transmission. The warnings from medical experts, that their airflow systems would need to be entirely overhauled for them to be safe, including through the development of pressurised rooms, has been dismissed as too costly and complicated.

Calls for purpose-built quarantine centres have also been blithely dismissed. Australia has just one such facility in the Northern Territory, but its capacity is just 2,000. The Victorian Labor government has discussed creating such centres since February, amid widespread anger over its own role in staffing the hotel quarantines with untrained contractors. It claims that these plans have been stymied by the federal government, which oversees the quarantines and has stated that it would not be feasible to have the facilities up and running by the end of the year.

The consequence is that most international arrivals, including those who test positive for COVID, are isolating in hotels in the country’s major urban centres. They continue to be staffed largely by low-paid, casual workers, who are frequently forced to work multiple jobs to make ends meet. The hotels have been the source of some 18 “leaks” into the Australian community over the past six months.

The vaccination program has been no less shambolic. Only around two percent of the adult population is fully-vaccinated. Last week, the federal government admitted that less than 1,000 of 26,000 disability-care residents have been given a shot, even though they were supposed to be in the first cohort of the rollout.

Residents and staff at more than 20 aged-care facilities across Melbourne are in the same predicament. In the state’s last major outbreak, in July–August 2020, 655 of the 801 deaths recorded were among aged-care residents, accounting for some

82 percent.

The vaccine shambles, like the quarantine program, is bound up with the subordination of health and safety to the financial calculations of the ruling elite.

The federal government rejected calls for a diversified procurement program, instead settling on AstraZeneca, the cheapest option, as the primary vaccine and waiting until late last year to finalise purchases, when other countries had begun their inoculations. Health advice that AstraZeneca not be administered to people under 50 years of age only compounded an already crisis-ridden rollout.

In addition to supply issues, the vaccine campaign has underscored the refusal of state and federal governments, Labor and Liberal-National alike, to expand chronically underfunded health facilities, even amid a pandemic. Much of the rollout is being left to local general practitioners, while “mass vaccination hubs” in a number of states have only been opened in recent weeks.

Throughout the pandemic, the state and territory administrations, the majority of them Labor-led, have participated with the federal government in an extra-constitutional “national cabinet.” It has frequently governed by decree. At the federal level, Labor has functioned as a “constructive” opposition, largely marching in lockstep with the Coalition. Notwithstanding Merlino’s limited criticisms of the federal government, his own administration is thus deeply implicated in creating the conditions for the current outbreak.

Over recent weeks, the focus of the national cabinet and the ruling elite as a whole, has been on creating the conditions for a premature resumption of international travel, as the final step to overturning all safety restrictions. Jayne Hrdlicka, CEO of Virgin, one of Australia’s two largest airlines, spelled out the profit before lives premise of this campaign, declaring that it was a necessary move “even if some people may die.”

The outbreak and the reopening drive demonstrate that a scientifically-grounded response to the pandemic, based on ensuring the safety and lives of working people, will not be forthcoming from any wing of the political establishment. The fight against the virus is a struggle against the capitalist profit system and its subordination of every aspect of society to the dictates of a corporate oligarchy.



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