

Melbourne lockdown extended as Australia's COVID-19 outbreak spreads

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The Labor government in Victoria yesterday announced a week-long extension of a lockdown in Melbourne, the state capital and Australia's second-most populous city, as an outbreak of a highly-contagious Indian variant of COVID-19 continues. At the same time, it significantly eased a number of restrictions in a bid to placate mounting demands from the corporate elite for an end to safety measures that obstruct profit-making activities.

In announcing that the lockdown would last at least an additional seven-days past its scheduled expiration at midnight tonight, acting Labor Premier James Merlino declared that his government had "no choice." "If we let this thing run its course, it will explode," he said. "We've got to run this to ground because if we don't, people will die."

In the week-and-a-half to yesterday, community infections in Melbourne had increased from two to sixty-one, with an additional three cases announced this morning. Notwithstanding the relatively low numbers, Merlino and Victoria's chief health officer reiterated earlier warnings that the so-called Kappa variant, which originated in India, was circulating more rapidly than previous iterations of COVID-19, the source of earlier outbreaks.

In particular, they stated that the current outbreak had seen a greater number of infections linked to casual and fleeting contacts in public spaces, whereas most cases last year were linked to prolonged exposure in workplaces and homes. The list of exposure sites, visited by people while they were potentially infected, now stands at over 350, in suburbs across Melbourne, as well as in regional areas.

Despite pointing to the dangers, Sutton and Merlino outlined the lifting of a number of restrictions, including in Melbourne. Non-essential industries that had previously been subject to a pause, such as landscaping, would be permitted to resume their operations.

When the lockdown was first imposed last week, schools were closed, except for vulnerable children and those whose parents were essential workers. Now, however, year 11 and 12 high school students are set to resume face-to-face classes.

Under conditions where the virus is still circulating in Melbourne, this directive has no public health justification.

As teachers have noted, the older cohort of students are more

likely to hold part-time and casual jobs at fast-food outlets and cafes, which are allowed to continue takeaway services, and at supermarkets and stores, which remain open. These students will be encountering dozens, or even hundreds of people, in the space of several days, and then entering enclosed and overcrowded classrooms with teachers, some of whom are particularly vulnerable because of age and underlying health conditions.

As has been the case throughout the pandemic, the reopening of schools is a crucial battering ram in the broader drive to prematurely lift lockdown measures. During outbreaks, the corporate elite, Labor and Liberal governments and the trade unions, have repeatedly herded students and staff into classrooms, because it is a precondition for forcing parents back to their workplaces.

In regional Victoria, the lockdown will be ended altogether from midnight this evening. Victorian authorities have cited the absence of active local cases in the regions as justification for this. However, a number of infected individuals left Melbourne while they were contagious, resulting in exposure sites being identified in major centres, such as Bendigo, and at outlets on heavily-used roads like the Hume Highway.

Health Minister Martin Folley, moreover, reported yesterday that sewage testing had resulted in the "unexpected discovery" of COVID-19 traces in Bendigo and the Mornington Peninsula, indicating likely community transmission. The danger of a broader spread was further exposed when it was revealed this week that a Victorian man and his family had holidayed in the neighbouring state of New South Wales (NSW). As a result, a number of exposure sites have been listed on the NSW South Coast, as well as in Goulburn.

While restrictions will remain in regional Victoria on large gatherings and indoor dining, the schools will be fully reopened and restrictions on movement eased. The government has touted a ban on travel to and from regional areas and Melbourne, but exemptions will be granted for work activities.

Unlike in previous lockdowns, the so-called "ring of steel" approach, in which Melbourne's border closure is enforced by police road blocks, has been rejected. Instead, compliance is being foisted on regional businesses, which will supposedly need to check IDs to ensure that patrons are not from

Melbourne. Given the exemptions, however, the scheme amounts to an honour system that could easily be circumvented.

All in all, the Victorian authorities are seeking to hedge their bets. They are keeping in place some lockdown measures because of the danger of a major eruption of cases and widespread public hostility to a hasty reopening, but they are recklessly lifting key restrictions to appease the corporate and financial elite.

The latest announcements come as more information continues to surface over the role of pro-business government policies in facilitating the spread of the outbreak.

Two cases were detected among aged-care workers on the weekend and Monday. Two elderly residents have also tested positive. It rapidly emerged that at least one of them had been working at multiple facilities, as had other staff at the affected sites. The federal Liberal-National Coalition government then acknowledged that a directive against this practice, which contributed to a massive spread of the virus throughout Melbourne care homes last year, had quietly been lifted in November.

It is now clear that there never really was a ban on staff working at multiple facilities. The *Age* reported this morning that a federal government grant to aged-care providers, to allow them to end the practice, was extended to just 33 aged-care companies, which operated only 90 of the Victoria's 600 Commonwealth-regulated homes. Only \$12.5 million was paid out in total.

The *Herald Sun* has also reported that at least one staff member at the Arcare Maidstone aged-care home in Melbourne was pressured by management to continue working despite having been instructed to isolate for a fortnight. This was the same facility where the two staff infections were later detected.

The primary preoccupation of the federal government has been to ensure that the exploitative labour practices in the sector, which have been encouraged by successive Labor and Liberal-National governments, are not disrupted by the pandemic. The health and safety of staff and residents is being subordinated to the drive by the multi-million-dollar companies that control the industry to pay staff the minimum-wage and to maintain their casual employment status.

The aged-care cases also prompted revelations that only a handful of staff in the sector have been vaccinated. Nationally, fewer than 40,000 workers have only received a single dose and even less have been fully-inoculated, in a direct workforce of 240,000, which includes more than 100,000 additional ancillary staff.

The company contracted by the federal government to vaccinate aged-care homes has stated that the deal did not include immunising workers. And private aged-care provider Mercy Health has claimed that it offered in February to vaccinate its own staff and residents, but was rebuffed by federal authorities.

This is a microcosm of the broader vaccine rollout debacle, which has so far resulted in less than three percent of the population being fully-vaccinated. At least half of Victoria's paramedics have not received their doses, meaning that the ability of the entire healthcare system to guard against outbreaks inside hospitals and among health workers is compromised.

The vaccine disaster has gone hand in hand with the failed hotel quarantine program, in which international returnees have been directed to isolate in private hotels that lack protections against airborne transmission. This was the source of the latest outbreak and of all others proceeding it over the past six months.

Both the vaccine and quarantine programs have been tailored to spend as little government money as possible, and to direct the resources that are provided to a patchwork of private companies. This has been accompanied by the overturning of virtually all safety restrictions prior to the current outbreak, including on sporting events and other lucrative mass gatherings.

While the pro-business program of the political establishment has jeopardised the health and safety of millions in Victoria and elsewhere, only a pittance is being provided in assistance for those hit by the consequences of the lockdown.

The state government has unveiled a \$250 million support package directed to business. Over the past week, federal government ministers have rejected calls for Commonwealth assistance to those who have been thrown out of work by the lockdown, only declaring this morning that they would consider allocating funds to alleviate the crisis.

The federal government ended its JobKeeper wage subsidy scheme at the end of March. Its ministers have contemptuously declared that those out of work will only be without a wage for a handful of weeks, and/or apply for the sub-poverty level dole payment.

Charities are reporting that thousands of casual workers, who overnight have lost their source of income, are requesting help with purchasing food and paying their rents.

Under conditions in which the state and federal governments have presided over more than \$400 billion in cash handouts, subsidies and tax breaks to big business throughout the pandemic, this is a graphic illustration of a class divide that is only deepening.



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