

Victorian Labor government ends Melbourne lockdown despite ongoing COVID-19 transmission

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The Labor government in Victoria announced yesterday that a two-week lockdown of the state capital, Melbourne, will end at midnight this evening, even though transmission of the coronavirus, including highly-infectious strains that originated in India, is continuing to result in new cases each day.

The ending of the lockdown was primarily a political decision, not a public health one. The announcement was made some 36-hours before the restrictions were scheduled to expire. This was a transparent attempt by the Labor government to placate the corporate and financial elite, which has been waging a ferocious campaign against any extension of the shutdown.

When they have imposed lockdowns previously, a number of state governments have insisted that it is not safe to overturn the measure until successive days without transmission.

This was the case during a protracted lockdown introduced by the Victorian government late last year, in response to the worst outbreak in Australia to date. Restrictions were only eased after nine days in which no new infections were recorded. Government ministers repeatedly declared that it would be reckless to lift the measures before the rolling average of new cases was approaching zero over 14-days, the potential COVID-19 incubation period.

Now, however, the same government is abolishing a lockdown as new cases are reported every single day. There are still hundreds of exposure sites, which were visited by people while they were infected, throughout Melbourne.

State authorities touted the fact that only one infection was announced on Wednesday, following two on Tuesday, as justification. On Monday, however, eleven cases were revealed, and today another four were reported. The latter are all from one family household. Indicating ongoing community transmission, the source of their infection is not known. They take the total number of active cases in the state to 91.

The dangers of a broad spread of the disease, with the lifting of restrictions, were underscored yesterday when it was revealed that a woman had tested positive on the Sunshine Coast in the north-eastern state of Queensland. The woman and her husband, who is also now infected, travelled from Melbourne, through Victoria and the neighbouring state of New

South Wales (NSW) before arriving at their destination. There are at least 15 exposure sites in NSW, including in major regional centres such as Dubbo.

The pair have immediately been branded as “reckless” and “irresponsible” by health authorities across multiple states. Victorian Acting Premier James Merlino was compelled to acknowledge today that if the couple were permanently relocating, they may not have broken Melbourne restrictions, but Queensland authorities have claimed they did not have a permit to enter that state.

In any event, the lifting of the Melbourne lockdown, allowing for the movement of people who are potentially infected in a city of more than five million, is an act of greater recklessness than anything two private individuals could carry out.

The majority of the infections in Victoria have been of the Kappa variant, which originated in India, and is more contagious than previous iterations of the virus. Last week, however, infections of the Delta strain, which is more virulent still, were first detected, followed by more cases this week. The spread of the Delta variant has resulted in a humanitarian catastrophe in India, and a resurgence of cases in a number of other countries, including Britain.

Even when Kappa was the only variant circulating, Victorian authorities stated that the current outbreak involved a more rapid spread of the virus than ever before in Australia. They noted incidents of transmission involving fleeting contact between strangers in public places.

This morning, Merlino reiterated that the lockdown will end. He sought to present this as a medically-responsible course of action, declaring: “Today we are moving ahead, but we are on high alert.”

In truth, his government’s decision is part of a drive by the political establishment to end all lockdowns, regardless of the public health consequences, so as to remove any barriers to the profit-making activities of big business.

It flows directly from a meeting last Friday of the national cabinet, an extra-constitutional body that has frequently governed by decree throughout the pandemic. The state and territory leaders at the gathering, most of them from the Labor

Party, accepted a proposal from the federal Liberal-National government that meagre Commonwealth assistance to those thrown out of work by lockdowns would be tied to a narrow definition of coronavirus outbreaks.

Under the federal guidelines, which the states had previously opposed, a COVID “hotspot” is only declared in an area if there are an average of at least ten cases per day over three consecutive days. Current recorded rates of transmission in Melbourne would not qualify, nor would any previous outbreak in Australia this year. In other words, the definition is effectively a decree against lockdowns, and mandates that they only be considered when mass transmission is already underway.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison gave practical application to the new doctrine on Monday, publicly-demanding the scheduled end of the Melbourne lockdown even though eleven new infections were recorded on that day.

The policies of the state and federal government amount to a gamble with the health and lives of working people.

When the lockdown was extended in Melbourne for an additional week, but ended in regional Victoria, the Labor government decreed that Year 11 and 12 high school students and teachers return to face-to-face learning in the city.

Now, the schools are to be fully reopened from tomorrow. Teachers, many of them with age and health vulnerabilities, will be forced into overcrowded classrooms with dozens of pupils. In last year’s Victorian outbreak, and internationally, schools have acted as vectors of the disease, resulting in large clusters and spreading the virus more broadly in the community. As has previously been the case, the Australian Education Union, which collaborates closely with the Labor government, will enforce the full reopening.

Cafes and restaurants are permitted to resume indoor dining, with a maximum-cap of 50 patrons and fewer for smaller venues. Offices, which were the source of one of the largest clusters this outbreak, will reopen, but with a 25 percent capacity limit. Outdoor gatherings are restricted to ten people with mandatory mask wearing required. Melbourne residents are permitted to travel within a 25-kilometre radius, but as before there are exemptions for work and other activities deemed essential.

The government has touted more stringent QR code check-in requirements, including for businesses that do not have public customers, as a means of limiting mass COVID spread. They have continued a ban on visiting other people’s houses. But the size of Melbourne and its population density mean that the largely unchecked movement of millions of people will make contact-tracing far more difficult.

The government failures that resulted in the current outbreak, moreover, have not been resolved. The majority of cases stem from a “leak” in a South Australian hotel quarantine. The private hotels, where the bulk of international arrivals are required to self-isolate, do not have protections against airborne

transmission and have been the source of the majority of Australian outbreaks.

Despite a “memorandum of understanding” between the Victorian state government and the federal government for a new purpose-built quarantine facility in Melbourne, there is no definite timeline on the initiative.

The federal government’s vaccine rollout continues to be a shambles. An untold number of health and aged-care workers in Melbourne, numbering in the tens of thousands, have yet to receive a dose. Most teachers are not inoculated.

Significantly, despite the end of the lockdown, the response of the financial elite to the Victorian announcement has been overwhelmingly negative.

A flurry of articles in the Murdoch-owned *Australian* have denounced the remaining safety measures. An editorial in the paper this morning summed up the line, asking: “Why prolong the agony with the new ‘post-lockdown restrictions’? Where is the health advice? And why not lift the lockdown a day early after just a single Covid-19 case was reported on Wednesday?”

Federal Treasurer Josh Frydenberg submitted a nauseating opinion piece to Murdoch’s *Herald Sun* yesterday, bemoaning the impact of the lockdown, and especially the school closure on children, “not as a politician, but as a parent.” “Kids have had enough” of the brief periods of online learning, the treasurer informed readers, before insisting that they and teachers must be in the schools, whatever the spread of the virus.

Because there would likely be recurrent outbreaks for some time, Frydenberg stated it was essential that “we do all we can to keep our schools open as their closure should only be a last resort.”

This is the program of the ruling elite internationally that has led to mass illness and death around the world. Workers, the poor and even children must be exposed to the risk of infection and death. The alternative, a scientifically-grounded public health program aimed at eliminating the virus, is unacceptable, because of its potential impact on the profits and wealth of the oligarchy.



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