

Australian state government rejects calls for lockdown as Sydney Delta outbreak grows

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The Liberal-National government in New South Wales (NSW), Australia's most populous state, is rejecting demands from epidemiologists and other health experts for the immediate introduction of a lockdown to stem a growing coronavirus outbreak in Sydney.

The decision has no public health justification whatsoever. The NSW administration is simply giving a practical demonstration of the mantras promoted by the financial elite throughout the pandemic and ever-more openly adopted by governments across Australia this year.

According to this sociopathic line of argument, it is necessary for ordinary people to "learn to live" with the potentially-deadly virus, and everything must be done to avoid disruptions to corporate profit-making activities, whatever the health consequences.

NSW Premier Gladys Berejiklian has sought to give this a folksy spin, claiming in recent days that she does not want to "burden our citizens" with the required public health measures. A sympathetic article in the *Australian Financial Review* absurdly claimed that the premier was defying calls from epidemiologists because she wished "to save the school holidays" and ensure that families could do as they pleased during the term break.

The recklessness is all the more stark, given that it is the Delta variant which is circulating in Australia's largest city. The variant is leading to a resurgence of the pandemic internationally, including in countries such as Britain, and others that had previously suppressed transmission. Delta's potential to drive a public health catastrophe has already been witnessed in the tragedy that has befallen the Indian population over recent months.

In the 24-hours to 8 p.m. yesterday, Sydney recorded 18 new cases, followed by another 6 overnight. That almost doubled the total number of infections, since the outbreak began on June 14, to 48.

Compared to figures being recorded around the world, the numbers remain relatively low. However, yesterday's tally of infections was the highest in Sydney since the city's last major outbreak last December. Prior to that, case numbers in the high teens for a single day were only recorded at the very beginning of the pandemic, in April 2020.

Wednesday's 18 infections, moreover, are a substantially greater number than any single-day count registered in Melbourne, before the state Labor government of Victoria announced a lockdown there last month. At the time that partial shutdown was announced, with Victorian authorities declaring it was necessary to prevent the outbreak from spiralling "out of control," the state had recorded daily case numbers of 2, 2, 12 and 9, for a total of 27.

As in the Victorian outbreak, the Sydney cluster has already shown the high transmissibility of Delta, which is up to twice as contagious as the initial iteration of the virus. One infection was registered after a woman walked past an infected individual in a shopping centre, another was caused by the briefest of contacts between strangers in a cafe.

And like in Melbourne, there are so-called "mystery cases," whose source is not clear, indicating undetected chains of virus transmission in the community. That includes one of the cases from overnight, and a young pupil at St Charles Catholic Primary School in the suburb of Waverley, who tested positive on Tuesday despite having no known links to any previous infections.

The government's rejection of lockdown measures over the past week has already allowed the geographical spread of the virus to greatly expand. The first cases were centred in a handful of Sydney's eastern suburbs. There are now more than 100 exposure sites in every direction of the city.

Almost half of yesterday's cases were recorded in the working-class southwestern suburbs, while regional areas outside of Sydney, including the steel city of Wollongong, have also registered potential exposures.

Because of the lifting of many travel restrictions, the Sydney outbreak threatens a spread of the virus in states across the country, most of which have only belatedly imposed border restrictions this week. Today, a man tested positive after returning to Victoria from Sydney.

The cluster has also gone international, after an infected Sydney man arrived in Wellington, New Zealand on Saturday, in the latest demonstration of the recklessness of a "travel bubble" between the two countries aimed at boosting the fortunes of tourism and other corporations. Little mention has been made of the possible infection spread from the planeload

of travellers returning to Australia with the man.

Speaking the day after Sydney had recorded its highest number of community transmitted infections in more than six months, Berejiklian this afternoon sought to project a smug complacency. Her “level of concern” was “medium to high.” Sydney was going through its “scariest situation” yet, but Berejiklian was “comfortable” that the “settings we have in place are appropriate.”

Together with the corporate press, Berejiklian has bizarrely sought to present yesterday’s record cases as a positive development, on the grounds that they could have been greater. “The situation is bad, but be thankful that it is not even worse,” is the general line, one which could be employed to downplay almost any conceivable crisis or catastrophe.

While seeking to justify her government’s rejection of a lockdown, Berejiklian was unable to deliver her press conference from the state parliament today, because it is currently locked-down. Agricultural Minister Adam Marshall has tested positive and Health Minister Brad Hazzard, a government hatchet man responsible for the state’s pandemic response, is in isolation.

The state government has had to delay the passage of its budget, because of the parliamentary outbreak. In previous surges of the pandemic internationally, the infection of prominent political leaders has often been a sign that transmission is occurring far more widely than is registered in official statistics, and that an outbreak is spiralling out of control.

While essentially declaring that her government would do nothing, Berejiklian took the opportunity today to hector the population, and to suggest that it is responsible for Sydney’s current predicament. The [non-lockdown] “settings” would work, but only if ordinary people “do the right thing.” “You need to socially-distance, you need to hand sanitise, you have to ensure that you are COVID safe,” Berejiklian declared, as she adopted the pose of an exasperated parent.

The NSW government has issued a directive banning residents in seven heavily-affected local areas of Sydney from travelling outside the city. It has reinstated caps on the number of patrons in indoor venues.

Aside from this, the government’s policy is essentially limited to an expansion of mask mandates. They are in place, not only for public transport and retail shopping, but also for workplaces, including offices and factories, for the first time since the pandemic began. The clear purpose is to ensure that there are no workplace closures. Gyms—along with cafes, restaurants and pubs—remain open but those doing exercise will also need to wear masks.

With the ending of the federal JobKeeper wage subsidy and the growing number of people on the poverty-level JobSeeker unemployment benefit, the NSW government is ensuring that businesses continue in the interests of the bottom line and profits.

Epidemiologists have become increasingly strident in their condemnations of the NSW government.

Professor Nicholas Talley, editor in chief of the *Medical Journal of Australia*, told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation: “I’m concerned the restrictions are not tough enough—this is the Delta variant, the worst possible threat, and going hard and early will provide the community the greatest safety.”

University of Melbourne epidemiologist, Professor Tony Blakely, warned: “Each day you delay means that if you need a lockdown, which I think is more than likely now, it will be longer and harder if they don’t do it soon. One of the other measures is keeping gyms open at the moment, even with people wearing masks, is, frankly, crazy.”

But the corporate press has seemingly never been more satisfied with Berejiklian and her government. In previous outbreaks, the official media has pilloried state authorities over their responsibility for quarantine and other failures that led to outbreaks. The Victorian Labor government in particular has been the subject of often hysterical condemnation.

The difference is that Berejiklian is holding the line for the ruling elite, for whom the corrupt corporate reporters speak, and is declaring that she will not declare a lockdown, even a limited one under popular pressure.

In this she has the support of the federal Liberal-National government, with Prime Minister Scott Morrison branding the refusal to implement a lockdown as “sensible” and stating that NSW authorities were “doing a terrific job.” For their part, the state premiers, the majority of them Labor representatives, last month agreed to new federal guidelines aimed at preventing any future lockdowns.

In NSW, the state Labor Party opposition and its new leader Chris Minns are virtually invisible, doing nothing to differentiate from Berejiklian amid rising popular demands for a lockdown. Minns was installed earlier this month, based on pledges to work “positively” with Berejiklian, as part of “team NSW.” For their part, the corporatised unions have not advanced a single demand to protect the health and safety of the workers they falsely claim to represent.



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