

Delay in Sydney lockdown allows COVID Delta outbreak to spread across Australia

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After more than a week of refusing to introduce lockdown measures in response to a worsening COVID-19 outbreak, the Liberal-National government in New South Wales (NSW), Australia's most populous state, on Saturday imposed limited two-week "stay at home" orders covering the Sydney metropolitan area and surrounding regions.

The days of delay, in defiance of warnings by medical experts, allowed the highly infectious and dangerous Delta variant, first detected in India, to spread from a cluster in Sydney's eastern suburbs throughout much of the city and across the continent, as well as to New Zealand.

This developing disaster is another indictment of the corporate profit-driven response of Australian governments, like their counterparts internationally, which have failed to implement effective lockdown, quarantine and vaccination measures, permitting new mutant strains to emerge, such as Delta, which has spread to more than 80 countries.

Over the past year, Liberal-National and Labor Party governments alike in Australia have only instituted coronavirus safety measures when compelled to do so by health staff and other workers. These measures have largely led to much lower infections than in comparable countries, but epidemiologists warned for weeks that outbreaks were inevitable because of the Delta surge.

Since the current outbreak began on June 16, NSW state Premier Gladys Berejiklian, backed by Prime Minister Scott Morrison's federal government, had dismissed appeals from public health experts and doctors for lockdown measures, despite Berejiklian herself describing the situation in Sydney as the "scariest" the city had faced during the pandemic.

As recently as Friday, Morrison declared in a Sky News interview that Berejiklian's government had "gold standard contact tracing" and people should "feel very confident that if anyone's going to get on top of this with their tracing and not have to shut the city down, it's the New South Wales government."

Saturday's belated "stay-at-home" order, giving the city's residents only four hours' notice, was made after Sydney recorded the largest number of daily infections thus far since

June 16. The 30 cases in 24 hours took the total to 112. Today, that figure rose by another 18 to 130.

The long list of exposure sites across Sydney has now exceeded 300, including busy shopping centres in working class suburbs and the state government's own vaccination hub at Westmead hospital, the largest public hospital in the western suburbs. Of particular concern also is an outbreak linked to Great Ocean Foods, a seafood wholesaler in inner-west Marrickville, where delivery drivers linked to the business tested positive.

By yesterday too, the infections had spread to five of Australia's eight states and territories, forcing a snap two-day lockdown in the Northern Territory capital of Darwin and mask mandates, reinforced restrictions and border closures elsewhere.

Even on Saturday, Berejiklian defended her government's decision to wait for days to lockdown greater Sydney. "I do not regret a single decision we have taken because it has been based on health advice," she said.

In reality, at every step of the outbreak, the NSW and federal Liberal-National governments, with the full support of the Labor Party, have subordinated public health to corporate interests, resisting necessary measures because they would impinge on profit-making activities.

This policy has been demanded by the financial elite, whose mouthpieces are complaining bitterly about the lockdown. Saturday's editorial in the *Australian* accused Berejiklian of "blinking" in the face of supposedly small numbers of infections. The *Australian Financial Review*, citing estimates provided by AMP Capital, claimed the Sydney lockdown would wipe more than \$2 billion from the national gross domestic product.

Even the origin of the Sydney outbreak demonstrates the priority given to corporate interests over public safety. Most of the Sydney cases have been linked to a limousine driver who transferred FedEx aircrew to a quarantine hotel. Despite corporate media efforts to demonise the driver, he was following the Berejiklian government's guidelines, which did not require such drivers to be vaccinated despite the

known dangers of infection from commercial aircrew. Reports are that he had been advised by his doctor to wait for the Pfizer vaccine due to widespread concerns regarding the Astra Zeneca vaccine.

Another case from the Great Ocean Foods outbreak was linked to a Sydney-based Virgin Australia flight attendant who tested positive after flying on five flights between Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane and Gold Coast while potentially infectious.

The months-long corporate drive to reopen domestic and trans-Tasman Sea air travel, regardless of the resurging global pandemic, also led to a Sydney man unknowingly infected with the Delta variant flying on a crowded plane to Wellington, New Zealand and back. Other passengers have likewise unwittingly carried the mutant strain to Melbourne and Perth.

Another failure of the quarantine system led to the infection being taken by a mine worker from a Brisbane hotel to a central Australian mine in the Northern Territory. Up to 900 fly-in-fly-out miners may potentially have been infected, some of whom travelled to Darwin, triggering that city's shutdown.

Some affected mine workers are indigenous, posing a threat to remote Aboriginal communities, where vaccination rates are reportedly only around 10 percent, despite the Morrison government claiming to have placed indigenous people in vaccination priority categories many months ago.

Today, the Queensland state Labor government also introduced compulsory mask-wearing and other limited restrictions in regions around Brisbane after it reported two new local cases linked to a previous leak in the hotel quarantine program, unrelated to the mine site cases.

The Delta variant is up to twice as contagious as the original version of the virus. Cases have been detected resulting from fleeting contact between strangers. A growing number of infections are of "unknown origin," indicating broader transmission than is yet known or officially recorded.

Confronting an intensifying political crisis, Prime Minister Morrison called an "urgent" meeting of the National Security Committee of cabinet this morning to put on a show of responding to the emergency for which his own government is directly responsible.

Anxious for continuing political protection from the Labor Party, which has given him "constructive" support throughout the pandemic, Morrison also convened an "emergency" meeting of the bipartisan National Cabinet, which consists of the federal, state and territory government leaders, the majority from the Labor Party.

For months, until last Friday, the federal government rejected calls for dedicated quarantine facilities, falsely

claiming that the hotel quarantines were overwhelmingly effective, despite nearly 30 known infection leaks.

The government's vaccination program has been even more disastrous, with less than 5 percent of the adult population fully vaccinated. There is no relief in sight over the winter months until substantial Pfizer shipments arrive, promised from October. Two-thirds of aged-care staff are not vaccinated, along with other frontline health workers.

Worried Sydney residents report having to wait two months or more for appointments for vaccine jabs. In his Sky News interview last Friday, Morrison ludicrously insisted that the vaccination rollout had been "really ramping up" since he placed military commanders in charge months ago, dubbing it "Operation COVID Shield."

Numbers of public health specialists condemned the delay in the Sydney lockdown. On Friday, Australian Medical Association President Dr Omar Khorshid said earlier localised restrictions were "confusing" and "just not enough." He warned of an approach dictated by the "economic consequences" of a lockdown, saying it could result in a situation similar to that in Victoria last year, when more than 800 people died.

Workers and small business owners being impacted by the restrictions are being denied adequate financial support. The federal government has said that it will make measly \$500 (full-time) or \$350 (part-time) disaster recovery payments available to Sydney workers affected by the lockdown from July 1. Anyone with savings of more than \$10,000 is ineligible, as are welfare recipients.

As a result of the pro-business policies of the entire political establishment, millions of ordinary people face the prospect of financial crisis, on top of the risks posed to their health.



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