

Almost half of Australia's population under lockdown measures as Delta outbreak grows

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Since Saturday, four state and territory governments have initiated limited lockdown measures, covering up to 12 million people, or almost half Australia's population, as outbreaks of the highly-contagious Delta variant of COVID-19 spread across the country.

Infection numbers remain relatively low, in the dozens each day in Sydney, where the current swell began, and single figures in several other cities. The governments have been compelled to impose restrictions, however, because Labor and Liberal-National administrations at the state and federal levels have created what some epidemiologists have termed a "perfect storm" for a major surge of the disease.

Prior to the current outbreaks, almost all safety measures, including caps on mass events, had been lifted. Australia has the slowest vaccination rate of an advanced OECD country, with only around 7 percent of the adult population fully-inoculated. Governments have, throughout the pandemic, failed to develop an effective quarantine program, instead relying on private hotels that are incapable of stemming airborne transmission and have been the source of up to 30 COVID "leaks."

The high transmissibility of the Delta variant, which is twice as contagious as the original version of the disease, and widespread public anger over the government failures, have prompted the current lockdowns.

Governments fear the public backlash, under conditions in which their political survival over the past year has largely depended on false claims to have protected the population from the coronavirus disasters witnessed internationally. Over recent days, demands for the resignation of Prime Minister Scott Morrison and denunciations of state leaders, particularly New South Wales (NSW) Premier Gladys Berejiklian, have developed on Australian social media platforms.

NSW authorities this morning reported 22 infections in the 24 hours to 8 p.m. last night. This takes the total

number of locally-acquired cases since June 16 to 171. They are all of the Delta variant and are in or near Sydney, the country's most-populous city.

For over a week, the Berejiklian government, with the full support of the state Labor opposition, rejected demands from epidemiologists for a lockdown. This allowed Delta to circulate, extending from the city's eastern suburbs to every corner of the city. On Friday, the NSW government announced stay-at-home restrictions for four local government areas, but infections were already being detected elsewhere.

Epidemiologists denounced the shambolic measure and correctly noted that it was dictated by the demands of large businesses that their operations not be hindered by a city-wide lockdown. Amid mounting cases, Berejiklian announced a lockdown covering all of Sydney on Saturday. Since then, daily infections have continued to approach or exceed 20.

With hundreds of potential exposure sites across Sydney, health experts have warned that the limited lockdown now in place may be insufficient to stem infections. On Twitter yesterday, Professor Bill Bowtell noted: "What's happening in Sydney is not a hard lockdown. Many non-essential businesses open. Mask compliance sporadic. Roads busy. Without JobKeeper support, some workers have to work despite risks. Beyond that, clarity urgently required about lockdown rules."

Many retail outlets are continuing their operations, while factory workers remain on the job, as they have throughout the pandemic. The federal JobKeeper wage subsidy was ended in March. Casual workers who have been thrown out of work are eligible for far lower federal payments, which are tied to stringent eligibility requirements. Affected small businesses may be provided with grants of between \$5,000 and \$10,000 by the state authorities.

Lockdowns in other states are also limited, and are set

to intensify a social crisis confronting working people.

Yesterday, the Labor government in the northeastern state of Queensland announced a four-day lockdown, effective until at least Friday. It covers the state capital, Brisbane, along with the regional city of Townsville and much of southeastern Queensland.

The outbreak there has highlighted the dangerous implications of the vaccine shambles. A 19-year-old unvaccinated receptionist working outside a COVID ward at Prince Charles Hospital in Brisbane contracted the virus, before visiting parts of north Queensland. Four cases of the Delta variant have been detected. The Labor government immediately sought to scapegoat the young worker.

In Western Australia, the state Labor government announced a four-day lockdown of the capital Perth and the surrounding Peel region, following three confirmed cases of the Delta variant. The outbreak began after a woman returned from Sydney, unknowingly infectious. At least one of the subsequent cases stemmed from transmission in a Perth gym.

The Northern Territory government has lengthened a lockdown of Darwin and extended it to the regional centre of Alice Springs. The territory has recorded at least nine COVID cases, all thought to be of the Delta variant, the first community transmission registered there since the pandemic began.

The outbreak is thought to have begun at the Tanami gold mine in central Australia. It has been staffed by fly-in fly-out workers. One of the staff members contracted the disease in a Brisbane hotel quarantine, before returning to the mine, prompting a lockdown of 640 workers at the site. Such fly-in fly-out operations have been permitted by governments throughout the pandemic, despite the clear risk of a COVID spread, so that nothing disrupts the multi-billion dollar mining sector.

The Northern Territory has some of the highest rates of poverty and social deprivation in the country, and is home to a large Aboriginal population. Despite being classed as a vulnerable demographic eligible for fast-tracked vaccination, rates of inoculation in Northern Territory communities, including those near the Tanami mine, are at 20 percent or lower.

An infected worker from the mine also visited South Australia while contagious, prompting limited restrictions there.

The state, territory and federal governments have responded to the crisis with mutual recriminations and attempts to downplay their responsibility. Throughout the

pandemic, all of them have collaborated in an extra-constitutional national cabinet, which has overseen the disastrous vaccine rollout, the failed hotel quarantine and the premature lifting of safety measures.

Federal Labor leader Anthony Albanese has bemoaned the impact of the outbreaks on big business, telling the *Australian Financial Review* that billions of dollars are being lost. State and federal Labor representatives have advocated lowering the intake of Australian citizens who remain stranded abroad. Fully-implicated in the official refusal to develop purpose-built quarantines, they are seeking to blame international arrivals and promote nationalist isolationism.

For its part, the federal Liberal-National government is increasingly mired in crisis. Prime Minister Morrison announced on Monday that all Australians could receive AstraZeneca vaccines, contradicting official health advice that the product is safe only for those aged over 60, due to rare bloodclotting complications. The Australian Medical Association and other doctors' groups have refused to endorse the new policy, with some openly implying that it is a political manoeuvre.

The AstraZeneca announcement again demonstrates the failure of the federal government to develop a diversified vaccination program. Instead it settled on the cheapest option available.

Amid widespread public concern over the outbreaks, the corporate and financial elite is clamouring for a rapid end to the limited lockdowns that have been put in place, and condemning governments for capitulating to popular pressure. Editorials in the *Australian* and the *Australian Financial Review* this morning accused governments of "overkill" and insisted that the population had to "learn to live with the virus," while other corporate outlets condemned the "insanity" of the current restrictions.



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