

Australian state government blames workers and the poor for Sydney's escalating COVID crisis

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In an extraordinary press conference yesterday, the New South Wales (NSW) Liberal-National state government sought to absolve itself of any responsibility for the escalating coronavirus outbreak in Sydney, instead blaming working-class residents of the city's south-western suburbs for the growing tally of infections being recorded under "stay at home" restrictions.

Those measures, which fall far short of a genuine lockdown, were set to expire this Friday at midnight. NSW Premier Gladys Berejiklian had repeatedly stated her intention to terminate the restrictions, regardless of the worsening coronavirus situation, as part of a broader ruling-class campaign for a permanent end to all COVID-19 safety measures.

Yesterday, however, Berejiklian was compelled to announce a week-long extension of the orders. This followed mounting anger towards her government, including from teachers, who were confronting a full resumption of face-to-face learning next Monday.

It is increasingly clear that the Berejiklian government only extended the measures, because Sydney's outbreak is spiralling out of control.

More than 600 of the city's nurses are reportedly in isolation after having been potentially exposed to the virus, 120 of them at Fairfield Hospital in the south-west and 500 from North Shore Private Hospital. Both facilities have been compelled to curtail their services.

Hospitalisation rates have risen dramatically. Last Friday, there were 17 people undergoing hospital treatment for COVID-19. That figure has risen to 40, more than doubling in less than a week.

The number of young people being severely stricken by the disease is far greater than in earlier outbreaks, when those hospitalised were overwhelmingly elderly. Seventeen of the patients are under the age of 55, with ten of those aged under 35. Eleven are in an intensive care unit, including one in their 30s. Three require ventilation.

The hospitalisation figure is the greatest Sydney has experienced since April 2020. Of even more concern is the

inexplicably high rate of those being infected who require serious medical care. There are currently 406 active cases in Sydney. With 40 people in hospital, this would indicate that as many as 10 percent of confirmed infections are leading to serious illness. While this could be the result of the deadly character of the Delta variant, it also suggests broader transmission that is going undetected.

Today, 38 new infections were revealed, the greatest number since the outbreak began. The tally surpassed the previous highs of 35 on Saturday and Monday.

The obvious contradiction is that the circulation of the virus has increased substantially since the introduction of the city-wide "stay at home" restrictions on June 26. On that day there were 119 active cases in Sydney, little over a week-and-a-half later, the figure has ballooned to 406.

Seeking to square the circle, Berejiklian and NSW Health Minister Brad Hazzard yesterday insisted that the existing restrictions were "appropriate" and should have been effective in stemming the spread. The issue was that the guidelines were not being followed by ordinary people, especially in the Local Government Areas of Fairfield, Liverpool and Canterbury-Bankstown, in the south-west.

This is a contemptible slander, aimed at shifting responsibility for the crisis from where it lies, with the government, to the victims of official policies in the poorest working-class suburbs of Sydney.

The virus entered the south-west because the Berejiklian government allowed it to.

For the first week of the outbreak, after the initial infections were detected on June 16, cases were almost exclusively centred in a handful of relatively affluent eastern suburbs. For ten days, Berejiklian's government defied increasingly strident calls from epidemiologists for the imposition of a lockdown, limiting the response to an expansion of mask mandates.

By the time the "stay at home" measures were put in place, COVID-19 had already spread throughout the city, with dozens of potential exposure sites in every direction. It was only in the past week that significant case numbers began to be recorded in the south-west. In the week to Tuesday, 23 cases were

identified in Fairfield, compared with just two the seven days before.

The real issue is the inadequacy of the existing measures. Virtually all retail stores remain open. So do mass shopping centres and clubs, both of which feature on the list of exposure sites.

Work is not restricted to that deemed “essential.” Instead, the hazy guidelines state that people must attend their places of employment, if they are unable to work from home. In practice, this means that hundreds of thousands of people are going to work each day.

The situation has been compounded by the federal Liberal-National governments withdrawal of the JobKeeper wage subsidy at the end of March. This means that workers, especially those employed on a casual basis, face the prospect of pauperism if their shifts are cancelled. They are eligible for a miserly federal payment capped at \$500 per week, tied to a host of criteria and only available after the first week of a lockdown.

While Berejiklian and Hazzard claimed that ordinary people in the south-west were flouting the rules, a charge for which they provided no evidence, it has been demonstrated time and again throughout the pandemic that the coronavirus hits working-class areas the hardest.

Figures published by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) today show that in Fairfield and Liverpool, some 20 percent of households are made up of five or more people, compared with 3.7 percent in Sydney’s inner-city.

Residents of such working-class areas are far less likely to be able to work from home. Around 11 percent of people in Liverpool are managers or professionals, and less than eight percent in Fairfield, compared with over 30 percent in the eastern suburbs that were previously the epicentre of the outbreak.

None of this was mentioned by Berejiklian or Hazzard. Instead, the claim was made that residents of the three areas were recklessly visiting friends and family. This was presented in thinly veiled racist terms as the result of the high concentration of migrant workers in the suburbs. They were sternly instructed to “stay at home,” even though in many cases, this is not possible.

Despite the growing crisis, the NSW government is not tightening the restrictions, only extending them for a week. Online learning will be in place from Monday, but schools will be open for the children of essential workers, and others whose parents cannot look after them. Given that so many people are being forced to continue attending their places of employment, teachers, especially in working-class suburbs, will in many instances be forced into overcrowded classrooms.

Hazzard guaranteed that a full resumption of face-to-face teaching would occur on July 19. This was necessary to give parents, teachers and “business” “certainty.” In reality, it is a declaration that the current measures, as limited as they are, will end regardless of the COVID situation.

Hazard pointed to another motive for the government demonisation of working-class residents. Asked by a journalist if the Delta variant may be too virulent to control, he stated that if ordinary people continued to break the restrictions, “we’re going to have to accept that the virus has a life that will continue in the community.”

Epidemiologists have warned that this is the program for a catastrophe. Speaking to the ABC this morning, Professor Raina MacIntyre of the University of New South Wales, stated: “If we let it spread in Sydney, it would impact the whole country and we could end up with a situation like we saw in India in March and April.” In those months, India was recording up to 400,000 infections a day along with 4,000 or more deaths. With the world infections over 185 million and the death toll over 4 million people the perspective being outlined by both the Morrison and NSW governments is a recipe for mass deaths.

Hazzard’s comments form part of a broader discussion in ruling circles about the need to end all lockdown measures for good. At yesterday’s press conference, the corporate journalists asked virtually no questions about those hospitalised by the virus, or the hundreds of nurses in isolation. Instead, with real fury, they demanded to know how the government could justify the impact of the current limited measures on big business.

At a national cabinet meeting last Friday, the state and territory leaders, most of them from the Labor Party, adopted a “roadmap” for ending restrictions presented by the federal Liberal-National government. It outlines a series of phases, to be declared based on vaccination rates that have not yet been decided upon, aimed at ending lockdowns and treating COVID-19 “like the flu,” in preparation for a return to normal.

Because of Australia’s shambolic vaccine rollout, the slowest of an advanced country, just nine percent of the adult population is fully inoculated. Political leaders have placed the figure for a “phased” reopening to begin at 30 or 50 percent, far lower than what would be required to prevent mass outbreaks.

In a warning of what is being prepared, it has emerged that there were divisions within the NSW government over the extension of the current restrictions. At the cabinet meeting where it was discussed, NSW Finance Minister Dominic Perrottet reportedly called for an end to the measures, in the interests of “the economy and jobs and business.”

This is the homicidal policy of the ruling elite internationally which has resulted in mass deaths to ensure corporate profits. If Berejiklian stopped-short of going as far as Perrottet at this stage, it was only out of fear over the mass anger and opposition that is building up in the working class.



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