

Delta outbreak spiralling out of control in Sydney

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The New South Wales (NSW) state Liberal-National government yesterday flooded Sydney's southwest with almost 200 additional police officers, as it seeks to scapegoat workers and the poor for an escalating crisis caused by its own criminally negligent, pro-business response to the city's COVID outbreak.

NSW authorities this morning reported 50 new infections, surpassing yesterday's record of 44. Up to 27 of the cases announced yesterday were not in isolation for all or part of their infectious period, along with 37 of those revealed this morning. Those numbers are higher than at any time since the outbreak was first detected on June 16.

This indicates that the Delta variant, among the most transmissible in the world, is circulating widely throughout Sydney, Australia's largest city with a population of over five million.

Today's record tally is particularly notable, because it was registered a fortnight after the NSW government belatedly instituted "stay at home" orders on June 26. Over the ten days prior to that, the government had rejected calls from epidemiologists for a lockdown.

Given that the maximum incubation period for COVID is thought to be 14 days, the ongoing rise of infections exposes the gross inadequacy of the "stay at home" orders.

Rather than curbing infections, these orders have allowed them to grow. Almost all retail outlets and workplaces remained fully open. There were virtually no restrictions on movement throughout the city, and limitations on things such as household visits were shrouded in confusion, due to deliberately vague "guidelines."

In an admission that her government's policies have failed, NSW Premier Gladys Berejiklian yesterday tightened restrictions and foreshadowed that they may last longer than the seven-day extension, until Friday, announced earlier in the week.

Outdoor gatherings are now limited to two people, excluding members of the same household, while Sydney's residents are only permitted to travel within a 10-kilometre radius of their homes for exercise and shopping. Only one

person per household may go shopping each day. Confusion, however, remains. "Browsing" in retail shops is banned, but there is no order for the closure of non-essential outlets.

Most workplaces will remain open, even though the list of exposure sites indicates that they are prime places of infection.

Less than a week ago, Berejiklian proclaimed the "green shoots of the lockdown" and insisted there were "positive signs" it was working, even as infections continued to rise. This was part of a push to lift even the limited restrictions then in place.

Yesterday, however, without referring to these earlier statements, the premier raised the spectre of "thousands and thousands of people in hospital and lots of people, thousands of people, potentially, dying" if the outbreak were not rapidly curbed. This morning, as she announced the 50 new infections, Berejiklian said "things are going to get worse before they get better."

Underlying the shift in tone is the prospect that Sydney's hospital system will collapse. On July 2, there were 17 COVID patients in hospital. In the space of a week, that number has risen to 47. Seventeen of those are now in an intensive care unit, up from six last Saturday—the highest figure for NSW since April 2020. Among those with a life-threatening illness are a teenager, as well as a person in their 20s and another in their 30s.

As has been the case internationally, the Delta variant is changing the age demographic of those seriously stricken by the virus. In last year's outbreaks, the overwhelming majority of hospitalisations were among the elderly, including aged-care home residents. Now, 19 of those in hospital are under the age of 55, accounting for more than 40 percent of the total. Eight of them are aged less than 35.

The rate of hospitalisation per active infection has been tracking at around 10 percent for the past several days.

At the height of a Victorian outbreak in July–August last year, the worst in Australia to date, that figure was closer to 8 percent. Even that comparison is deceptive, however, because by August, thousands of people who had been

infected had recovered and were thus not among the active cases. Given the Sydney outbreak has spanned a little over three weeks, the number of recovered cases is far lower.

There are already signs of major strains in the health system. Early last week, more than 600 nurses across the city were forced into isolation after potential exposure, 120 at Fairfield Hospital and 500 from North Shore Private Hospital.

This morning, the *Daily Telegraph* reported an internal memo, circulated in a hospital in the city's south-west last week. It revealed that up to 35 percent of nurses remained unvaccinated. In addition to staff and student nurses on clinical placements, they included nurses working in emergency wards.

The memo called for unprotected workers to be kept away from "hot" and "red" zones in the hospital, where COVID patients were present. Effectively acknowledging that this is unviable, given that more than a third of staff are unvaccinated, the document called for such segregation to be put in place "where possible."

For months, medical experts have warned that Australia's chronically underfunded public hospitals are unable to cope with demand, even when COVID transmission was low. Prior to the pandemic, Australia's hospital system had an average of 3.9 beds per 1,000 people, compared with the OECD average of 4.7. Without private hospitals, the figure was just 2.6. Despite the global health catastrophe of the past year-and-a-half, nothing has been done to increase hospital capacity.

In a statement yesterday, Australian Medical Association President Dr. Omar Khorshid declared: "With hospitals completely full we can't as a medical system even cope with a flu epidemic, let alone a COVID epidemic." Khorshid warned that the consequences would be "unthinkable" if the Sydney outbreak were not brought under control.

On Thursday, Khorshid rejected calls from the corporate elite, along with ministers in the NSW government itself, for the virus to be allowed to circulate so that full business activities could resume. "We need to look at India or Indonesia to see what the reality will be in Australia if we let this virus rip through the community," he said.

In April, India was frequently recording more than 400,000 infections per day, and over 4,000 deaths. Indonesia is currently registering tens of thousands of cases a day, with a daily death toll approaching one thousand.

Khorshid's statement was a reference to Australia's vaccine rate, which is the slowest and lowest of any advanced country. The crisis-ridden rollout is a consequence of the country's gutted health infrastructure and a federal government procurement policy that settled on the cheapest vaccine available, AstraZeneca. Only around 9 percent of

adults are fully inoculated, with no timetable in place for the rollout to be completed.

Combined with the state and federal removal of safety restrictions, and a failed private hotel quarantine program, this has created the perfect storm for a major outbreak.

Having presided over the shambles, together with the other state and federal administrations, the NSW government is scapegoating its victims. It has claimed, without a shred of evidence, that the escalating crisis has been caused by residents, especially of Sydney's southwestern suburbs, flouting the official rules.

The slander is particularly contemptible, given that large numbers of infections only began in those working-class areas over the past week, as a direct consequence of the state government's refusal to implement more stringent measures.

Instead of announcing increased resources for already-stretched hospitals in the southwest, or an influx of medical staff and community workers, the Berejiklian government has dispatched hundreds of police officers. Given that the southwest already has a huge police force, the affected suburbs resemble those under a police occupation.

Residents have reported that far from providing assistance, the police, including officers on horseback, are patrolling the areas in a menacing and intimidating manner, some without masks.

Many have made the obvious point that similar measures have never been imposed in more affluent areas, including the city's eastern suburbs, which until a couple of days ago, remained the epicentre of the current outbreak. The state Labor opposition, which has marched in lockstep with Berejiklian, has not issued a word of criticism over the police deployment or anything else.



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