

Australian epidemiologists call for tougher restrictions as NSW government admits Sydney COVID-19 crisis is “out of control”

Oscar Grenfell
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A host of epidemiologists are calling for the New South Wales (NSW) state Liberal-National government to urgently introduce sharper restrictions in Sydney, as the only means of suppressing a rapidly growing outbreak of the Delta strain of COVID-19 in Australia's most-populous city.

The statements from health experts have grown more strident over recent days, as it has become clear that infections threaten to grow exponentially. In a damning self-indictment, NSW Deputy Premier John Barilaro stated this morning that the outbreak was now “out of control.”

Speaking on Channel Seven's “Sunrise” program, Barilaro admitted that lockdown measures “should have come earlier,” but sought to absolve his government of any responsibility by declaring that “hindsight is a beautiful thing.”

“If we got to rewrite history, of course you'd go down harder and earlier if you knew what was coming, but we didn't know that,” Barilaro said. The deputy premier's comments recall the proverbial wise monkeys who saw and heard no evil.

In reality, the dangers of a mass outbreak were well known when the NSW government refused for ten days to impose any lockdown measures after Delta infections were first detected in Sydney on June 16. Following the belated introduction of “stay at home” orders on June 26, it quickly became clear that the measures, falling far short of a genuine lockdown, were failing to stem the spread, instead resulting in a growth of infections.

Australia's abysmally low vaccination rate, amid a shambolic federal rollout, was hardly a secret to Barilaro and his colleagues, with official figures indicating that only around 11 percent of the adult population is now fully inoculated. Nor was the catastrophic potential of the Delta variant, up to three times as infectious as the initial version of the virus, a mystery, after the humanitarian catastrophe that unfolded in India and a resurgence of the pandemic internationally.

As is increasingly recognised by millions of people, the reason the NSW government repeatedly failed to implement the necessary measures is not because its ministers are stupid and ignorant, as Barilaro's comments suggest, but because they have subordinated public health to business interests. At each step of the outbreak, the government has resisted the scientifically grounded proposals of medical experts, instead seeking to keep “the economy open” to maximise corporate profits.

This program, supported by the entire political establishment, including the state Labor opposition, has resulted in the worst outbreak in Sydney since the pandemic began and is now threatening to become the most serious anywhere to date in Australia.

There is widespread anger at the NSW government's delay in enacting any measures to prevent this entirely predictable outbreak. Social media posts are replete with condemnations of the refusal of the government to implement meaningful restrictions, with many calling for Berejiklian to stand down.

Yesterday, Sydney recorded 112 locally acquired infections, the highest number in NSW since March 25, 2020. A further 89 were announced this morning, with warnings that if the rate of growth over the past several weeks continues, daily tallies in the multiple hundreds will be registered.

When they were announced yesterday, the source of 48 of the infections was still “under investigation,” indicating a mounting crisis of contact-tracing. At least 46 of the cases yesterday and 27 today were moving about the community for all or part of their infectious period, signalling further transmission. A total of 767 infections have been recorded in the past four weeks.

Alarmingly, hospitalisation rates are continuing to approach nine or ten percent of confirmed cases. There are currently 65 people in hospital, almost a quarter of them, 21, in intensive care units. Those stricken by the disease include a teenager, as well as people in their 20s and 30s, with the demographic shifting younger compared to previous outbreaks. A man in his 70s tragically died yesterday, making him the second victim of the current surge.

After decades of funding cuts, imposed by Labor and Liberal-National governments at the state and federal levels, public hospitals operate at or close to capacity most of the time. With the surge in COVID-19 hospitalisations, there are fears that they may be overwhelmed. Facilities across the state are preparing to suspend elective surgeries, while hospitals in Sydney are converting wards to accommodate COVID-19 patients.

Aside from the fact that it has hit Australia's largest city, the national implications of the Sydney outbreak are clear. The neighbouring state of Victoria reported three new cases today, after two separate incidents of infected people from Sydney travelling there. One cohort also entered South Australia while carrying the virus.

With cases in Sydney growing, epidemiologists have warned that the current restrictions remain inadequate, despite a marginal strengthening over the weekend that focused on household visits and limitations on the number of people per home who could go shopping.

Modelling released this week by the Burnet Institute, a medical research outfit in Melbourne, found that the current restrictions in Sydney would not result in the effective suppression of COVID-19 but would likely result in a plateau of at least 30 new infections per day.

In a stark warning, the paper stated, “Even if [current] density restrictions are maintained for an entire year, without additional restrictions the model projects around 12 times as many deaths as influenza deaths in 2017—one of the worst years on record.” The researchers advocated the introduction of “stage four” restrictions, similar to those which eventually curbed a major outbreak in Melbourne late last year, stating that if these “were applied now, the epidemic curve would decline sharply.”

In comments to “Sky News,” Mike Toole, one of the institute’s researchers, noted that the Sydney outbreak was spreading more rapidly than the Melbourne surge. “The pace of this outbreak is actually faster than Victoria’s second wave and that is due to the Delta variant which is very infectious,” he said. It had taken Melbourne 37 days to reach 566 total cases, which Sydney reached on Sunday in just 25.

The “stage four” measures that the Burnet Institute experts are advocating, along with many of their colleagues, involve significant closures of retail and other non-essential businesses. It is precisely this that the NSW government is seeking to avoid. Throughout the various restrictions, virtually all retail outlets have remained open, including those whose products are patently not essential, along with mass shopping centres.

This morning, Premier Gladys Berejiklian and NSW Chief Health Officer Kerry Chant again called on people not to leave their homes unless it was “essential,” but they stopped short of the obvious next step, i.e., closing non-essential retail. In an acknowledgment that workplaces are significant venues of transmission, the government has ordered that workers from Fairfield, who travel to places of employment outside the south-western suburb, be tested every three days.

The measure is limited to Fairfield, however. While it has become a centre of infections over recent days, cases have been recorded throughout the city.

This morning, an official from the Shop, Distributive and Allied Employees Association reported that nine tenths of exposure sites, which have been visited by people while potentially infectious, are retail stores. The union, notorious for its sweetheart deals with the employers and for cutting the wages of low-paid workers, is not proposing any action to address this state of affairs.

While total figures are not released, the exposure list indicates significant workplace transmission. For some 11 percent of the hundreds of sites listed, it is apparent that the infected individual was an employee, because the potentially infectious period spans an entire shift or multiple days.

This morning, it was revealed that two cases were recorded at Amazon’s warehouse in the south-western suburb of Moorebank.

The transnational corporation has informed workers there that the facility is indefinitely shut. Given that they are all casuals, this means they have been cut-off from income overnight.

The same is the case for hundreds of thousands of others. If their workplaces are closed, they are eligible for a miserly federal assistance package capped at \$500 a week, far-less than the previous JobKeeper program. In addition to accelerating the social crisis, this serves to force workers to remain in their places of employment. The NSW and federal governments are set to announce additional financial programs covering Sydney today, but they will be for business.

In other words, the program of the state and federal governments, is set to worsen a crisis hitting the working class the hardest, on both the social and health fronts.

Rather than focusing on the necessary health measures and policies to address the plight of working people, the NSW government is locked in discussions on ending the limited restrictions in place and boosting corporate profits.

Last week, it was revealed that NSW Treasurer Dominic Perrottet had opposed any extension of the existing lockdown beyond July 10. Three anonymous cabinet ministers later spoke to the press, expressing their dissatisfaction with the lockdown measures. As the Burnet Institute and other experts have warned, the policies being advocated by these ministers, of allowing the virus to spread, would result in a “catastrophe.”

If Berejiklian has not gone that far yet, it is only because she knows she is sitting atop a social and political powder keg.

The Sydney outbreak, and the push for a reopening, underscore again that a rational, scientifically grounded response to the pandemic requires the independent mobilisation of the working class. As workplace transmission grows, workers must take matters into their own hands, through the formation of rank-and-file committees to enforce safety measures and to organise industrial and political action where production must be stopped to ensure health and lives.



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