

Sydney workers and youth speak out against NSW government's criminally-negligent response to COVID-19 outbreak

Our reporters
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There is widespread public anger over the official response to a rapidly worsening coronavirus outbreak in Sydney, Australia's most populous city.

The state Liberal-National government, acting with the support of the Labor Party opposition, refused for ten days to implement lockdown measures after cases of the highly-infectious Delta variant were first detected on June 16. Thousands have branded the belated measures that were introduced as a “mockdown,” because retail and other non-essential businesses remain open.

While seeking to keep the “economy open” to ensure corporate profits, the NSW government has sought to scapegoat workers in south-western Sydney for the escalating crisis.

The virus only began spreading in the south-west as a result of the official failure to introduce earlier restrictions. Despite this, government ministers have slanderously claimed that working-class residents are recklessly defying public health orders, without providing any evidence.

The government has deployed almost 200 additional police officers to the south-west, on top of the thousands already there, while refusing to provide additional resources for a chronically-underfunded public hospital system that is on the brink of a major crisis.

The criminally-negligent official response, and its naked class character, is the subject of widespread discussion on social media and in working-class areas.

The WSWs has spoken to a number of workers in the south-west and more broadly about the issues they face.

Ali, a resident of the south-west suburb of Bankstown and a public sector worker, denounced the police mobilisation likening it to a “military curfew” and noting that it was “producing a backlash in the community.”

“How come this wasn’t applied to people in the more affluent eastern suburbs, where the latest infections started? The state government is virtually blaming us for the latest increase in COVID-19, but we had nothing to do with the quarantine breaches that began this latest wave or the federal Morrison government’s disorganised vaccine program.

“[Prime Minister Scott] Morrison has completely mishandled the vaccination program and we have no proper quarantine system. They treated the issue with complete complacency and now the biggest city in Australia is in lockdown.

“This is a working-class area with many others involved in small businesses—the most vulnerable people—being hit. People that are isolated who don’t speak English and are not given clear information

in their own language are confused and at risk. These are the people that could get infected and die.

“My wife, my son and two of my nephews haven’t been able to work in the past weeks. It is also having a psychological impact on us, particularly people who immigrated to Australia from countries where there were military dictatorships.

“Turkish people, the older generation and others, see all police patrolling everywhere and it brings back memories of military curfews. On Saturday there were helicopters buzzing all around Bankstown. My wife was in Turkey when the last military coup happened. She remembers the police, the tanks and the planes and warnings that if you go out after eight at night you’ll be shot.

“We are on the edge of a major economic crisis and the whole world is being turned upside down with this pandemic. It has exposed capitalism for what it really is. There is no coordination to fight the pandemic, no order and they are fighting about the lack of vaccines and who gets them. They’re fighting about where the virus came from, instead of taking the right action to stop the pandemic and latest more dangerous version of it.

“We don’t have tanks on the streets of Bankstown, but we have a military guy supposedly in charge of the national vaccines program appearing on television in full uniform. Why is the military involved? This is a civil, public health crisis issue, not a police or military question. It seems that our freedoms can be eroded at the drop of a hat. Imagine how the government would react if there are social explosions. If people don’t have an income to keep themselves and their families alive there’s going to be social explosions.”

Castro, a worker from western Sydney, said, “lockdowns would probably not be necessary if governments had established purpose-built quarantine stations outside of the capitals, instead of using hotels in major cities which have been a dangerous source of the spread of infections. Australians should be allowed to return from overseas safely, which they would have if there were proper quarantine stations.

“The vaccine roll-out is a disgrace. The government is politicizing the vaccination program by not using vaccines from every country in the world. They should be accepting a variety of vaccines, including vaccines from China and Russia, not just the US and Europe, if Australia isn’t able to produce enough of its own.

“People are feeling discriminated against. They are bringing almost 200 police to the western suburbs, supposedly to control an outbreak. Why didn’t they do that in Bondi where this began to spread?”

Tom, a poet from Marrickville, an inner-western suburb, said, “The

lockdown is not hard enough here with the mutations rife. Without communication and translation how can those in the targeted communities be able to understand what is required? This is typically racist of the government.

“The government seems to make exceptions like an unvaccinated businessman going back and forth to Indonesia and for the Olympics. That shouldn't be happening. Everyone coming in and out of Australia must be vaccinated.”

Mané, a psychology student from western Sydney, said: “The attitudes of NSW police in western Sydney have been very aggressive and they have shown a clear example of abuse of power. They are targeting specifically those of Middle East background, whilst using terms such as ‘immigrants’ to describe them.

“The outbreak began in the eastern suburbs at Bondi. There were people there who did not comply with COVID regulations and it seems there were few consequences for them. But the tone changed when the virus reached the west and the south-west and they sent in the police.”

Inge, a pensioner from the Blue Mountains region west of Sydney, which is also in lockdown, said: “It is abundantly clear that the federal and NSW state governments think about the managing of the epidemic entirely in political terms related to their ties to ‘big-spenders’ and managing perceptions of voters. Perhaps the most despicable aspect of this is when they try to land on victims to blame.”

She pointed to “the lack of obvious government actions such as proper quarantine facilities, and clearly explained and timely lockdowns.

“The other policy failure is to not recognize the economic difficulties placed on workers, especially lower income workers, to lock down, quarantine and even take time off to be tested without any financial reimbursement. It has become clear that this pandemic has enriched the rich and made life tougher for the poor.

“On top of the inevitable failure of a wishy-washy lockdown that allowed non-essential businesses to stay open, now we have an appalling blame game. The government says ‘the issue is 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. What research and observation might this appalling, classist, privileged statement be based on? Has someone been going around counting violations? Who are ‘ordinary’ people?

“The outbreaks started in the affluent suburbs where I assume the ‘extra-ordinary people’ live. Why were they allowed the freedom to seed the much wider spread? I take it people rich enough to not be at work and to be wandering around the many open retail outlets spreading the virus, are also extra-ordinary people? I suspect ‘ordinary’ people have much less opportunity for working from home also.

“This developing of an ideology of ordinary/extraordinary division is appalling and dangerous. To the have/have-nots division, NSW Premier Gladys Berejiklian is adding the privileged extraordinary who will be excused for everything, the ordinary who will be blamed. The vision of letting the virus continue its life in the community may be coupled with the hope that the poor ‘ordinary’ people will bear the brunt of the deaths.”

Partap, a teacher in western Sydney, commented, “This is important, the government delayed launching a lockdown and have lost a lot of time. I think there should have been a lockdown enforced from the beginning of the outbreak. There needs to be more

restrictions so that people are not moving around.

“The delayed lockdown has made the situation worse. The experts know there are more dangers with the latest variant. Businesses are remaining open and shopping malls are open. More industries should have been shut down.”

Partap pointed out the particular vulnerability of teachers in relation to the virus. He said, “teachers are frontline workers and should have been vaccinated a long time ago. It's been eighteen months now and teachers are surrounded by kids who come from all over the place. I think they should close the schools for longer and then vaccinate teachers as soon as possible. A lot of teachers are over 50 years of age and so are vulnerable.

“The government has slackened off. The AstraZeneca vaccine should be utilised more. I think the vaccine should be compulsory for everyone. Just look at what is happening overseas. India and other parts of Asia have a devastating third wave.”

Nora, a mathematics student from western Sydney, said, “The police rollout is the most invasive, oppressive insult to society in south-west Sydney. It is offensive and disgusting to know I am targeted because of the way I look and the area I live in. It makes me sick.

“The virus doesn't even come from here. It came from Bondi. Earlier in the lockdown I went to [the inner-west suburb of] Rhodes for exercise and the difference is incredible, people weren't wearing masks. There weren't any police but there was a beautiful Bentley.

“We've seen convoys of police here, congregations of police in shopping malls. I have witnessed three low-flying choppers today and it's only 5 p.m., there will be more tonight. The police drive around and let off their sirens when nothing is going on, just to let you know they are there. Helicopters flying low hurt your ears from the pressure and they circle overhead. All this does is destroy any respect we have for the police. I have called the police before and no one came but now they turn up when there is no one on the street.

“I don't care what the Labor Party says, their opposition has no value to me. I don't need them to speak to me and I don't want them to. I am proud of my people here in south-west Sydney. We don't need politicians to speak for us because we will do it. I am upset with all the politicians. They are all terrible.

“My cousin works at the COVID centre in Homebush and he's not vaccinated but there are private school kids who are. It makes this whole police presence worse. The police say ‘we are here to protect you,’ but then we put citizens at the COVID centre who are not vaccinated. It does my head in.

“The only reason why police would have to exert such a force is if they are scared of us. They are scared, not us.

“It's racist and everyone knows it. You go to Rhodes and it's not like this. It's because there is a high Muslim and Arab population here. Everyone is in it together here, the Maronite will fight for their Muslim neighbour because that's his neighbour.”



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