

Australia's coronavirus outbreak and the failure of the capitalist system

Socialist Equality Party (Australia)
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The claims of Australian governments to have protected the population from the worst of the coronavirus catastrophes witnessed overseas, and media depictions of the country as an idyllic exception to the global crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic, have been exposed as an utter fraud.

Sydney, Australia's largest city, is in the grip of its worst outbreak to date, with daily infections having exceeded a hundred for the first time in over a year and total cases surpassing 1,000 in a month. Hospitalisation rates are rising rapidly, including among the young, prompting fears of a collapse of the healthcare system. Government ministers admitted this week that the surge is "out of control."

The crisis is no longer confined to one city, with cases in Melbourne, the second-most populous state capital, prompting the introduction of a limited snap lockdown. Exposures have been registered also in Queensland and South Australia.

The outbreak is part of a global resurgence of the virus, with the Delta variant, up to three times more contagious than the original version of COVID-19, present in more than 104 countries and spreading like wildfire. Mass infections are being recorded in historically-oppressed countries such as Indonesia, as well as in countries that previously claimed to have suppressed the virus, and imperialist centres like Britain and the US.

The resurgence, in Australia and internationally, is an indictment of the capitalist system. While the pandemic is a health crisis, it is also a political crisis. It is not the outcome solely or primarily of the biological characteristics of the virus. It is the entirely foreseeable consequence of the policies of capitalist governments, which have subordinated the health and the very lives of working people to the interests of the financial elite. Everywhere governments have rejected scientifically-grounded measures, particularly full lockdowns, because of their impact on corporate profits.

This homicidal program has resulted in more than four million deaths and almost 200 million people having been infected with a virus that could devastate their lives for decades to come. By allowing the unchecked spread of COVID, governments have transformed the world into a giant petri dish for the emergence of new and more dangerous variants, such as Delta, posing the threat of vaccine-resistant strains.

The new global wave, moreover, is occurring as the ruling elites and their governments push for an end to all safety measures, including the most minimal, such as mandated mask wearing. The mantra of the financial oligarchs and their servants is that there must be a "return to normal," by which they mean the removal of any fetters on business activities, even at the cost of hundreds of thousands more lives.

The pandemic is global and cannot be eradicated in one country

alone. It requires international collaboration, planning and the allocation of the resources of society as a whole to address this growing scourge. This cannot take place under capitalism, which is based upon ensuring the production for profit and the wealth of the tiny elite who own it.

The policies of Australian governments, state and federal, Labor and Liberal-National Coalition alike, have been based upon the same ruthless logic of the capitalist market. Ignoring warnings from epidemiologists of inevitable outbreaks, all of them presented the pandemic as a thing of the past, refusing to take any measures that would protect the population. The result is that the Australian governments have created the perfect conditions for a mass outbreak.

For over a year, the governments have refused to develop purpose built-quarantine facilities, instead using private hotels in the city centres, which all but guaranteed outbreaks. There have been more than 30 COVID "leaks" from the hotels, accounting for almost all the significant outbreaks of the past year.

The vaccine rollout, overseen by the federal Coalition government, has been an unmitigated disaster, with the lowest rates of inoculation of any advanced country. As with the quarantine program, the vaccine procurement and distribution effort has been based on minimising government costs and providing a boon to private contractors.

Virtually all safety restrictions had been abolished in the months leading up to the present outbreak. After cases were detected, it took the New South Wales (NSW) Coalition government 10 days to implement limited "stay at home" orders in Sydney. These remain a mockery of a genuine lockdown, allowing virtually all businesses, including non-essential retail, to remain open.

This criminally-negligent response, combined with attempts to blame the population and a major police deployment in the working-class suburbs of Sydney, has produced mass fury.

Hundreds of thousands of people have taken to social media to condemn the subordination of health to profit, to demand serious policies to curb the outbreak and to call for the ouster of Prime Minister Scott Morrison and NSW Premier Gladys Berejiklian. Both their governments, which were being hailed in the financial press only months ago as beacons of stability, are mired in a deep crisis, along with the entire political establishment.

The public opposition is entirely justified, and demonstrates again the striving by working people for a response to the pandemic based on public health and social need. But anger alone is not enough. What is needed is an independent political movement, directed against the source of the crisis, the profit system, and all its defenders.

This requires a complete break with Labor and the trade unions. Labor leaders have made mealy-mouthed criticisms over recent weeks

of the federal and NSW governments, mostly centred on the impact of the outbreak on business.

But Labor has been centrally involved in every aspect of the official COVID response. State and territory leaders, the majority of them Labor, have been in an extra-constitutional national cabinet with the federal government throughout the pandemic, where they have devised the vaccine and quarantine debacles and plotted against lockdowns and safety restrictions. Since he became federal Labor leader in 2019, Anthony Albanese has marched in lockstep with Morrison.

Labor, no less than the Coalition, is an instrument of the corporate and financial elite. It plays the crucial role, along with the unions, in suppressing social opposition and enforcing the dictates of the banks. The unions, which long ago transformed themselves into an industrial police force of big business, responded to the pandemic by entering into daily collaboration with the federal government, slashing the pay and conditions of millions of workers, and ensuring that there were fewer strikes in 2020 than any other year in history.

With outbreaks at Sydney hospitals, a growing spate of infections in workplaces, the refusal to implement a genuine lockdown and the national spread of the virus, the working class has to take matters into its own hands.

Rank-and-file committees, completely independent of the unions, must be established in all workplaces. They are the only means by which workers can enforce safety measures, share information and coordinate industrial and political action, including strikes to shut production where it is not safe.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) will give every political assistance to workers seeking to fight for their health and social interests, and to establish such committees.

The crisis, however, raises fundamental political issues that cannot be addressed at the level of individual workplaces or any one country.

In May 2020, the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), of which the SEP is the Australian section, likened the pandemic to the assassination of Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand, which sparked the outbreak of World War I in August 1914. It explained that both were “trigger events,” accelerating existing, social, economic and geopolitical crises and ushering in a period of social upheavals.

Eighteen months into the pandemic, that analysis has been entirely vindicated.

In the opening stages of World War I, many thought that the conflict would be over within months and the combatants home by Christmas. But the fighting went on and on, as the death toll rose to the millions, because it served the interests of the capitalist ruling elites. The conflict only ended after the Russian socialist revolution of 1917 touched off a wave of mass struggles by the working class throughout Europe and internationally, threatening the survival of all the governments and compelling them to conclude the war.

In the same way, any conception that the pandemic was a conjunctural event, soon to be referred to in the past tense, has been blown out of the water. Capitalism and its political representatives have proven to be unwilling and unable to implement the measures required to suppress the virus and protect the population. Instead, the ruling elites are exploiting the pandemic to further their preparations for war abroad, and to intensify a war against the working class at home.

Just as it is no exception on the health front, so these global geopolitical and class processes are finding sharp expression in

Australia. The country is on the frontlines of the escalating US preparations for war against China, backed by the entire political establishment, including Labor, the Greens and the trade unions. Hundreds of billions are being handed to the military to ready it for a conflict that could result in a nuclear catastrophe.

And the corporate elite, with the crucial assistance of the unions, is using the crisis to step up an onslaught against jobs, wages and working conditions across the board. Workers face pay cuts, declining conditions and starvation-level assistance packages if they are thrown out of a job by the pandemic. But Coalition and Labor governments, with the support of the unions, have handed more than \$400 billion to big business and the banks during the pandemic.

It is now clear that the global health crisis, the associated threats of war, and the social counter-revolution, can be halted only through the intervention of the working class on a global scale. The crisis cannot be resolved within the framework of antagonistic capitalist nation-states, each advancing the interests of their own ruling elites, or the profit system, which subordinates everything to the wealth accumulation of the oligarchy.

This is a global crisis of capitalism that requires an international solution involving nothing less than the reorganisation of society on a world scale. The resurgence of the class struggle, which is finding its first expressions, is the basis for such a development.

In April, the ICFI called for the formation of an International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC). It explained: “The IWA-RFC will work to develop the framework for new forms of independent, democratic and militant rank-and-file organizations of workers in factories, schools and workplaces on an international scale...”

“It will be a means through which workers throughout the world can share information and organize a united struggle to demand protection for workers, the shutdown of unsafe facilities and nonessential production, and other emergency measures that are necessary to stop the spread of the virus.”

This fight is inseparably tied to the need for a socialist program, aimed at establishing the political power of the working class on an international scale, placing the banks and the corporations under public ownership and democratic workers’ control, and developing a society based on meeting social need, not private profit.

The SEP, as the Australian section of the ICFI, is the only political party that fights for this socialist and internationalist perspective. We urge workers, students and young people looking for a way forward to contact us today and join the SEP.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

wws.org/contact