

Australian ruling elite demands an end to all lockdowns as COVID crisis escalates

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There are feverish calls from prominent representatives of the Australian corporate and financial elite for an end to all lockdown measures, a “return to normal” and for the population to be forced to “learn to live with the virus.” The homicidal thrust of the demands which centre on placing big business profit above everything else, including the lives of working people, is all the more stark given the escalating coronavirus crisis in Australia’s two most populous states.

Sydney, the capital of New South Wales (NSW), is in the grip of its worst outbreak to date. More than three weeks after extremely limited lockdown measures were first instated, the country’s largest city is consistently recording around one hundred cases of the highly-infectious Delta variant each day. There are over 400 exposure sites across Sydney, as well as in some regional NSW centres.

On Friday, the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported that 170 of all infections, which then stood at little over a thousand, were “mystery cases,” meaning the authorities had no idea of how the virus was contracted. The same day it was revealed that the NSW Liberal-National Coalition government had pleaded for other state administrations to bolster its contact tracing efforts, which it previously claimed were the “gold standard.”

On Saturday, the government imposed harsh measures on three working-class areas in southwest Sydney that have been epicentres of the virus, prohibiting all but essential workers from leaving the suburb. Such localised measures have been tried and have failed in previous outbreaks. A day later, moreover, after meetings with business chiefs and lobbying from the corporatised trade unions, the government granted a host of exemptions, including for 19 different areas of retail. The new list is so expansive that it renders the claims of a hard lockdown fraudulent.

Victoria has extended a five-day lockdown that was declared on Thursday night after Delta infections spilled over from NSW. The state has already recorded 81 infections, its list of exposure sites is approaching 200, including football games attended by tens of thousands of people, and the spread has extended from Melbourne to regional centres such as Mildura.

Under these conditions, and with a rapidly rising rate of hospitalisation in Sydney that has already claimed four lives, everything must be done to contain the virus. That is the

standpoint of a host of epidemiologists who have demanded more stringent restrictions to curb the outbreak, and of hundreds of thousands of working people who have angrily condemned the existing measures as inadequate and profit-driven.

The attitude of the corporate elite is very different. For them, the problem to be overcome is not the deadly virus and its spread, but the insistence of broad sections of the population that policies be based on public health and science. Giving ever-more naked expression to the ruthless logic of the capitalist market, leading financial commentators are demanding that these progressive sentiments be confronted and overcome, and that workers be told they have no choice but to face the risk of infection or death.

Perhaps most striking was a column on Saturday in the *Australian*, Rupert Murdoch’s flagship publication. Its author, Chris Kenny, declared his hope that the virus would continue to spread in Sydney. “Maybe the only way to convince our over-zealous politicians that they must learn to live with Covid-19 is for them to confront a situation where they cannot eliminate it, no matter what pain they impose on their communities,” he wrote.

Kenny’s article, and others like it, have been framed as an attack on “overzealous” and “power-hungry” state premiers, who have inflicted “pain” on the “economy.” In truth, all the state governments have resisted lockdowns and other public health measures in line with their defence of profit interests. When they have instituted such measures it has been a result of fears over a possible collapse of the healthcare system, and above all, that mass anger and opposition from the working class will erupt. It is this that Kenny and his colleagues are demanding be taken on and defeated.

Kenny tacitly acknowledged this by noting that the state and territory leaders, most of them from Labor, had agreed in June, along with the federal Coalition government, that lockdowns would be a policy of “last resort.” The issue, he claimed, was that in practice this was not being carried out.

Making plain what he was advocating, Kenny denounced Berejiklian for having “locked Greater Sydney down, even though it faced a situation a long way short of the ‘last resort,’” even though epidemiologists have stated that without

the current, limited restrictions, the situation in the city could come to resemble the catastrophes in India and Indonesia.

A similar line was taken in a feature article by the *Australian's* editor-at-large Paul Kelly, but he was more explicit about the source of the problem. Kelly warned that “resentment of Berejiklian’s status as the ‘gold standard’ reluctant to lock down has been unleashed.” and that her “authority” as a champion against lockdowns, along with that of Prime Minister Scott Morrison, was “under pressure.”

This was part of a broader problem, with the “Australian mindset” seeming “addicted to lockdowns.” As a consequence, “The message that Australia ‘must learn to live with the virus’ is a cliché making little progress in real life. Australia has developed its own political culture about the virus—heavily risk-averse, instinctively inclined to lockdowns, and demanding the federal government stump up the money to sustain individuals and businesses as long as they are affected.”

This was not a “tenable mindset for recovery and opening up the economy.” It threatened Gross Domestic Product, i.e., business profits. Morrison’s “political future” depended on him making good repeated assurances that there was a “‘path out’ of the pandemic.”

The discussion unfolding in Australian ruling circles is part of a global push to declare the pandemic over, even as it resurges around the world. The demands for an end to “Australia’s lockdown culture” are coupled with warnings that the country’s corporate sector will be disadvantaged, as other nations press ahead with their homicidal policies.

The models are Britain and the US. In the former, Prime Minister Boris Johnson is lifting all restrictions today, including mask mandates, even as his government admits that this will result in 100,000 or more daily infections and an increase in deaths. US President Joe Biden has all but described the pandemic as a thing of the past, despite rising US cases and hospitalisations.

Again in the *Australian*, Nick Cater wrote an article headlined, “Boris Johnson leads the way on Covid rules—are we game to follow?” He cited warnings from a hundred British epidemiologists that the lifting of restrictions would result in a medical catastrophe, but only to hail “Johnson’s courage in defying the experts” as “a virtue that should be emulated by political leaders closer to home.”

Cater invoked war, declaring, “In Britain, Johnson revives the Dunkirk spirit, fighting Covid-19 on the beaches, landing grounds, fields and in the streets. In Australia, premiers call on their subjugated citizens to fight the virus from their couches.” Johnson is not fighting COVID-19, he is allowing it to spread in line with the homicidal program of “herd immunity.” This is a war, not against the virus, but against the working class.

The comments referenced above do not just reflect the positions of individuals, but of powerful sections of the corporate elite. The political establishment, while fearful of provoking mass popular opposition, has demonstrated time and

again its commitment to a profit-dominated response.

In June, the state and territory leaders and the federal government agreed to a four-phase “roadmap” for ending restrictions. According to Prime Minister Scott Morrison, under phase two of the plan: “Lockdowns would only occur in extreme circumstances to prevent escalating hospitalisation and fatality.” Phase three would see the virus treated like the flu, and phase four a “return to normal.”

The transition from one phase to the next would be based on vaccination rates, yet to be determined. With Australia’s vaccination level the lowest of any advanced capitalist country as a result of a shambolic federal rollout based on minimising government spending and maximising profit opportunities, financial commentators and politicians are calling for the reopening to be pinned to a rate that would guarantee catastrophe.

Kenny stated that Australia was “either painfully close to” beginning the phased “reopening” or “already in a position to start” even though little over ten percent of the adult population is fully vaccinated, and even many frontline workers in health and aged care are still not inoculated. Other commentators have put the figure at 50 percent with all adults supposedly having been given the “opportunity” of vaccination. This is the line of former deputy chief medical officer Nick Coatsworth, who has close ties to the Morrison government.

The protracted delay in implementing restrictions in Sydney, and the manifestly inadequate character of those eventually instituted, was a partial implementation of this agenda. But the financial elite wants more: for death to be normalised on a mass scale, for the virus to become endemic and for millions to be endangered with infection, all in the interests of profit.

The current COVID-19 crisis, and the discussion within ruling circles, are a warning to the working class. The concept, peddled by official politicians and the media, that Australia was exempt from the global pandemic crisis, has been exposed as a fraud. All of the major parties, including Labor, and the unions, are committed to an agenda that jeopardises the safety and the very lives of working people.

The alternative is the formation of rank-and-file safety committees in every workplace, to enforce safety measures, share information and shut down production when there is a risk of infection, and fight for a socialist perspective, aimed at reorganising society to meet social needs, not corporate profit interests.



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