Australian COVID crisis expanding with more than half the population under lockdown

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A COVID outbreak that began in a handful of Sydney suburbs mid-last month is now undeniably a massive national health crisis in line with the resurgence of the pandemic globally. As a direct consequence of the criminally-negligent policies of the state and federal governments, Labor and Liberal-National alike, the highly-infectious Delta variant is spreading in cities and towns across the country that are home to more than 13 million people, over half the total population.

Sydney remains the epicentre, frequently recording more than one hundred cases per day, and with ever-greater indications that the crisis is out of control. But infections are also rising in Melbourne, the state capital of Victoria and the second-most populous city. Locally-acquired cases are also being registered in South Australia for the first time in many months, prompting the imposition of lockdown measures.

The New South Wales (NSW) Liberal-National Coalition government today announced 124 cases in the 24-hours to 8 p.m. last night, the highest figure since infections were first registered on June 16. Premier Gladys Berejiklian declared that the state needed to be prepared for "cases to go up even higher" over the coming days.

The figures continue to be presented in a dishonest manner, aimed at downplaying the extent of the spread. The government highlights the number of daily cases where those with the virus were circulating in the community throughout their infectious period. It then briefly notes the number of other people who were in the community for "part" of their infectious period, without providing any further details.

When the two figures are combined, however, it demonstrates that the spread of the virus is largely unchecked. Of yesterday's 110 infections, 73 were in the community for all or part of the time that they were potentially-contagious. The proportion was even higher today, at 87 of 124.

Only 67 of today's cases were "linked to a known outbreak," meaning that well over 40 percent were of "unknown origin." The number of such infections, where chains of transmission have not been determined, are rising rapidly. This indicates that there are many cases that are not being identified at all by the health authorities. Of the 1685 infections recorded in Sydney 419 or 25 percent are "mystery cases."

Contact-tracing, which the NSW government, along with Coalition Prime Minister Scott Morrison previously boasted was the "gold standard," has broken down. Late last week, it was revealed that NSW authorities had issued an urgent appeal to other state administrations to help bolster its contact-tracing efforts. Yesterday it was reported that Transport NSW workers were being seconded to assist the pandemic response, including in a quasi-medical capacity, advising those tested of their isolation requirements, providing them with risk assessments and advising of "referral processes."

This desperate measure comes amid revelations that people are in some cases waiting in excess of 100 hours before receiving their test results, far above the 24–48 hours that is aimed for. Laverty Pathology, which processes some 10,000 tests per day, is reportedly struggling to keep up with demand. The reliance on the private company again highlights the refusal of state and federal governments to bolster the chronically-underfunded public health sector, even under conditions of a global pandemic.

Berejiklian today sought to defend her government's response to the outbreak, even though it is now undeniable that official policies have not only failed to halt the spread of the virus but created the conditions for its expansion. She claimed that the restrictions introduced by her government had been proportionate and had prevented "thousands and thousands of new cases" being recorded each day.

In reality, the fact that the highest daily tally has been registered almost a month-and-a-half into the outbreak, is an unanswerable indictment of the government. For ten days,

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after infections were first recorded on June 16, it refused to impose any additional safety measures, aside from an extension of mask mandates.

When stay-at-home orders were eventually put in place, they were of such a limited character that they could not be described as a lockdown. Virtually all businesses, including non-essential retail, remained open, along with the vast majority of workplaces.

Only last weekend did the government impose some non-essential business closures. But this was limited to three Local Government Areas (LGAs) in southwestern Sydney, that have been epicentres over recent weeks. Similar localised measures have been tried and have failed repeatedly. And dozens of industries were exempted a day after the restrictions were put in place, following joint lobbying from big business and the thoroughly-corporatised trade unions.

The spread, moreover, is far wider than one or a handful of LGAs, but extends throughout Sydney, with infections and exposure sites being registered in every direction.

Western Sydney, which had recorded very few cases over the first month of the outbreak, is emerging as a new hotspot, with 29 infections yesterday, and 40 today, up from fewer than five per day a week ago. As in the southwest, the western suburbs are working-class, with far higher averages of household density and workers who cannot perform their employment from home.

Three of the state's central west local government areas of Blayney, Cabonne and Orange are now in lockdown following infections through workplace transmission.

The extension of the pandemic to the regional area is another indication that workplaces are central drivers of transmission. Data indicates that around ten percent of infections, since the outbreak began, have been contracted at work. Around 30 percent of those have then unwittingly spread the virus in the community. An unknown number have transmitted it to family members.

Despite this clear evidence, the government is continuing to reject calls for sharper restrictions. NSW Health Minister Brad Hazzard today declared that "nobody wants to impose restrictions on our population that are unnecessary." What he meant is that the NSW government and its counterparts will not implement necessary public health measures if they will have a negative impact on corporate profits.

This means that the government has no perspective whatsoever to bring the outbreak under control. In the press conference today, Berejiklian and Hazzard were unable to state what policies they would implement to reduce transmission.

This criminally-negligent program has a homicidal character, especially under conditions of Australia's shambolic vaccine rollout, which has seen only around 14 percent of the adult population fully inoculated. Three aged care facilities in Sydney have recorded eight positive cases, six of whom are unvaccinated staff members. They are among the tens of thousands of aged care workers, nurses and other frontline workers who remain unvaccinated.

The response in NSW has allowed the virus to spread across the country. South Australia has recorded 14 cases over recent days, prompting a limited lockdown of the state.

Victoria today registered 26, up from 22 yesterday and the highest tally in ten months. While the virus "spilled" into the state from NSW, the policies of Victoria's Labor government have facilitated its spread. This included the resumption of mass sporting events, with two football matches, attended by tens of thousands of people, among the state's almost 400 exposure sites. A statewide lockdown was yesterday extended for at least seven more days.

Exposure sites have also been recorded in the regional Victorian areas of Phillip Island, Mildura, Wycheproof, Bacchus Marsh and Waurn Ponds, as well as the NSW central west region around Orange, indicating that the virus is spreading outside of the major capital cities.

Despite the expanding crisis, there is a drumbeat from the corporate sector and the financial press for governments to dispense with even the limited safety measures in place, and to embark upon a course of "living with the virus." These increasingly strident calls are directed against the mass popular sentiment, which is in favour of scientifically grounded public health policies, dictated by the needs of society, not those of the corporate and financial oligarchy.

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