Victorian Labor government ends lockdown as Australia's COVID crisis deepens

Oscar Grenfell
28 July 2021

The Labor Party government in the state of Victoria yesterday lifted a limited lockdown despite new cases of the highly-infectious Delta variant of the coronavirus being announced each day in Melbourne, Australia's second-largest city.

The reckless move is in line with a campaign against safety measures by the corporate and financial elite on the grounds of their impact on big business profit. This has already resulted in a major national COVID crisis.

The South Australian Liberal state government also ended a short lockdown even though the government's public health website still lists 94 exposure sites that were visited by people while they were potentially infectious.

The New South Wales (NSW) Liberal-National administration is continuing to reject calls from epidemiologists for urgent sharp lockdown measures, and is instead easing some of the inadequate restrictions in place as the virus circulates uncontrolled throughout Sydney.

The Victorian decision demonstrates that the official hostility to necessary safety measures is not confined to the conservative Liberal-Nationals, NSW Premier Gladys Berejiklian and Prime Minister Scott Morrison. It is a bipartisan policy in line with the profits-before-lives program that has caused mass death and illness around the world.

During outbreaks last year, Victorian Labor Premier Daniel Andrews repeatedly stated that it was not safe to conclude lockdowns before there had been at least two weeks of zero transmission, or close to it. That was to cover the maximum incubation period of the virus.

Now, however, Andrews has ended a lockdown under conditions in which thousands of people have potentially been exposed to the Delta variant which is up to three times more infectious than the virus circulating in Australia last year. The very day he made the announcement ten infections were reported, followed by another eight this morning.

Speaking to the press, Andrews claimed it was appropriate to conclude the lockdown because cases over recent days had not been infectious while they were in the community. It took less than 24 hours for this line to be exposed as a sham. One of today's infections is a young worker at the Moonee Valley Racecourse drive-through COVID testing facility. He was possibly contagious at the site and while travelling around the city.

There are still more than 19,000 people in Melbourne who have been directed to self-isolate because they were at one of the hundreds of exposure sites that have been listed over the past month. The large number is the direct consequence of the Victorian government's lifting of virtually all safety restrictions before the current outbreak. This featured a resumption of mass sporting events.

Those in isolation include some of the tens of thousands who attended two football matches alongside infectious people, as well as restaurants, bars, markets and other public venues.

The danger of leaks of the virus from people in isolation who may yet be infected is clear. They are not in quarantine facilities—even the inadequate private hotels that have been the source of multiple outbreaks—but in their homes. The government is seeking to absolve itself of any responsibility for potential failures of the self-isolation regime, with Andrews repeatedly hectoring those who have been directed to remain at home not to leave prematurely.

Teachers are being herded back into crowded classrooms, with a full resumption of face-to-face education from today. But schools have repeatedly been the source of COVID clusters, and many teachers are not inoculated as a result of the shambolic federal vaccine rollout. As they have previously, the Australian Education Union and the other teacher unions are working with the Andrews government to enforce the return in the face of

widespread concern from teachers, staff, parents and students.

Venues that were heavily represented on the exposure list are also resuming operations. Bars, restaurants, pubs and cafes can have a maximum of 100 patrons at any one time, supposedly subject to a density limit of one person per four square metres. Hairdressers and beauticians are reopening, as are offices, with a capacity of 25 percent.

A previous restriction on movement based on a five-kilometre radius has been abolished, although masks will remain mandatory inside and out, and visits to other people's homes remain banned. These measures have a cosmetic character. The extent of the reopening means that the Delta variant could rapidly spread throughout Melbourne.

The dangers are evident from the situation in Sydney, the NSW capital, where the COVID crisis is out of control. Today a record 177 COVID cases were revealed by the NSW government, up from the previous high yesterday of 172, and 68 of today's cases were in the community for all or part of their infectious period. The status of another 62 was described as being under investigation. This means that as many as 130 people, of today's infections alone, were possibly circulating in the city while contagious.

The NSW government is continuing to blame ordinary people for the spread of the crisis, with threadbare assertions of rule violations, especially in the working-class suburbs of western and southwestern Sydney. This is a slander aimed at covering up the government's own responsibility.

For 10 days, after infections were first detected on June 16, it refused to put in place any measures other than extended mask mandates. Then, it implemented "stay-at-home" measures, which were widely dubbed a "mockdown," because they allowed virtually all businesses, including non-essential retail to remain open.

This allowed the virus to circulate throughout the city after it was initially concentrated in the relatively affluent eastern suburbs. When COVID infections began being recorded in the southwest, including suburbs such as Fairfield, the government imposed more stringent measures on the population of three local government areas and deployed additional police.

On July 17, the government banned people from those areas travelling elsewhere for work, unless their position was deemed "critical." However, a day later, after lobbying from the corporations and the trade unions, a host of exemptions were granted, rendering the measure largely meaningless.

After overseeing the spread of the virus to the western suburbs, which has gone from a few cases daily a fortnight ago to dozens each day, Berejiklian announced today that the more stringent localised restrictions would be extended to the Parramatta, Campbelltown and Georges River local government areas.

Aside from the issue of exemptions, it has been demonstrated, time and again throughout the pandemic, that such localised measures are wholly inadequate, especially under conditions of widespread transmission throughout the city.

The announcement was aimed at justifying the ongoing refusal of the government to institute stringent city-wide lockdown measures as demanded by epidemiologists. Instead, while putting in place tougher measures in the working-class suburbs, the government is lifting restrictions, including on big business. Today, it announced that construction would resume from Saturday outside the local government areas in western and southwestern Sydney.

Year 12 students will return to face-to-face learning, placing them and teachers at risk. The recklessness of this measure is demonstrated by NSW Health data reported by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation this morning. It shows that of the 2,397 infections in the Sydney outbreak so far, 583, or almost a quarter, were among children and teenagers.

The government's refusal to implement necessary safety measures is creating a healthcare crisis. Eleven people have died already, but the tragic fatalities are likely to rise. There are 165 people infected with COVID in Sydney hospitals, with 56, close to a third, in intensive care units. Twenty-two require ventilators to continue breathing.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact