

Sydney records highest daily number of COVID infections since pandemic began

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Sydney, Australia's largest city, is now undeniably in the grips of its worst coronavirus outbreak since the pandemic began, with daily infections, mystery cases of unknown origin, hospitalisations and the number of critically-ill COVID patients all reaching record levels.

Yesterday's tally of 239 locally-acquired infections of the highly-contagious Delta variant is the largest Sydney has yet registered. It came after previous case numbers of 172 on Tuesday and 177 on Wednesday and was followed by another 170 new infections today.

The figures remain lower than in many other parts of the world which are being ravaged by the resurgence of the pandemic and the Delta variant. But the Sydney outbreak has already decisively refuted the claims of parliamentary politicians and the corporate media that Australia was somehow exempt from the coronavirus catastrophes that have taken place internationally.

Australian governments have embraced the same homicidal program, on behalf of big business, that their counterparts have carried out internationally. The escalation of the Sydney outbreak, from just two cases on June 16 when infections were first detected, to well over 200 in a single day less than a month-and-a-half later, is the direct and foreseeable consequence of government policy.

Throughout, the New South Wales (NSW) Liberal-National government of Premier Gladys Berejiklian has refused to take the necessary lockdown measures demanded by epidemiologists. Its belatedly-introduced restrictions have fallen far short of the widespread workplace closures medical experts said will be required to curb the outbreak. The governing motivation has been to minimise the impact of the crisis on corporate profits.

Under the piecemeal restrictions eventually put in place, infections have continued to soar. While there

has been some fluctuation, the trajectory is clearly up, with warnings that an exponential growth may be beginning. On July 15, for instance, there were 65 new infections, on July 22 there were 124 and July 29, 239.

An ever-greater proportion of the cases announced each day are described as being "under investigation" or of "unknown origin." This means that health authorities have no idea how transmission occurred, indicating a wider spread of the virus than is being recorded in testing results.

Well over half the latest infections fall into this category, including 126 yesterday and 93 of those reported this morning. Overall, the number of these "mystery" cases is approaching a third since the outbreak began, with NSW Health figures indicating that up to 872 of the 2,980 infections recorded since June 16 are of unknown origin.

NSW contact tracing, previously promoted by Berejiklian, Prime Minister Scott Morrison and much of the corporate media as the "gold standard," is in a crisis, with urgent requests in recent weeks for assistance from other states and attempts to involve transport staff. According to data cited by the *Australian*, only 67 percent of new cases were interviewed within 24 hours of being notified they were infected in the week ending July 26, down from 95 percent the previous seven days.

The number of confirmed cases that were in the community while potentially-contagious is already reaching record levels, meaning that daily infection tallies will inevitably grow. As many as 105 of today's cases fall into this category, along with up to 158 yesterday, which was also the highest for Sydney since the pandemic began.

Hospitalisations have also reached unprecedented levels, with 187 COVID patients in Sydney, 58 of them

in intensive care and 24 requiring ventilation to continue breathing. This means that the current toll of 13 deaths is likely to grow substantially over coming days and weeks.

As has been the case internationally, the Delta surge is refuting the claim used by governments and the corporate media to push for school and workplace openings that younger people are not at risk of severe illness. Of the 54 people who were in intensive care yesterday morning, two were teenagers, eight were aged in their 20s, four were in their 30s and three in their 40s.

There are already indications that the chronically-underfunded healthcare system is under intense strain. There were 916 NSW Health staff on COVID-related leave in the fortnight to July 18, up from 225 in the previous two-week period. With more than a quarter of those hospitalised requiring intensive care, there are fears over capacity levels, with at least three major hospitals—Royal Prince Alfred, St Vincent's and Liverpool—all instituting an indefinite “pause” on elective surgery deemed to be non-essential this week.

While reflecting the virulent and deadly character of the Delta variant, the hospitalisation demographics also reflect infection trends more broadly. In the seven-days to last night, there were 1,133 total infections. Of those, 120, or more than 10 percent, were among children aged nine and younger, with 158 among 10–19 year-olds. The most-heavily infected age groups were 20–29 and 30–39, accounting for 236 and 227 respectively.

Together with the large number of mystery cases, the age breakdown further refutes government claims that the increase in cases is the result of reckless family gatherings and rule violations. Those most-heavily impacted are working age, in line with the fact that workplaces have and continue to be central venues of transmission.

The NSW government has not responded to yesterday's record infection numbers by changing course in the slightest. It is doubling-down on its scapegoating of workers and the poor, while doing everything possible to protect big business interests.

Stringent measures that have been in place in south-western working-class areas of Sydney have been extended to the western suburbs, with eight local government areas now subject to the measures. The virus only began circulating in the south-west because

the government refused to institute lockdown measures when it was first detected in the relatively-affluent eastern suburbs. It is only in the past fortnight that cases in the western suburbs have grown substantially.

These areas are not being flooded with additional medical staff or community workers. Instead, a massive police presence, which residents have likened to an occupation force in a war zone, is to be augmented with some 300 Australian Defence Force personnel. They will patrol the streets of these working-class areas, enforce “compliance” by knocking on doors and by fining those who forget to wear a mask outdoors or are otherwise accused of breaching the health orders.

This is a punitive, police-state response. Not only is it a blatant attempt at scapegoating, it is also a preparation to repress widespread social and political opposition to the grossly-inadequate government response to the outbreak, and a social crisis that has worsened substantially over the past month. The measures mean that Sydney residents are essentially divided, based on the class character of the suburb in which they live. Those outside the targeted working-class suburbs are subject to far-less stringent restrictions than those who are within them.

Meanwhile, the NSW government is pressing ahead with a reopening of the construction sector outside the targeted areas, in a dangerous, profit-driven move. Year 12 students are also slated to return to classrooms in two weeks' time, placing them and their teachers at risk.

As a result of a shambolic federal rollout, only around 18 percent of the adult population is fully vaccinated. Despite this, a meeting of the national cabinet this afternoon is set to focus on the details of a phased “roadmap” for “reopening” the economy, ending lockdowns and ensuring a “return to normal,” even as the pandemic enters a new and potentially-more deadly stage.



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