

Australian “National Cabinet” pushes reopening “roadmap” as Delta crisis worsens

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Even as the outbreak of the extremely-infectious Delta coronavirus variant continues to lurch out of control in Sydney, the country’s most-populous city, and re-emerges in Brisbane, the third biggest, the National Cabinet has proposed a rush to fully reopen the economy.

The bipartisan “roadmap” adopted unanimously by the federal, state and territory government leaders last Friday amounts to a declaration that the profit-crazed demands of the corporate elite must take priority over the health and lives of millions of people. The National Cabinet, a majority of whom are from the opposition Labor Party, is a de facto coalition government, dictating policy in the interests of the financial elite.

The pandemic’s latest wave in Australia, involving the Delta mutant, has so far not reached the catastrophic levels of many other countries, such as India, Indonesia and Fiji. But it has already led to several thousand infections nationally, and a growing number of hospitalisations and deaths, including among young people.

This underscores the global character of the pandemic disaster, which is worsening because the ruling elites and their governments have all subordinated public health to business interests. They have rejected or prematurely lifted safety measures, thus allowing the COVID-19 virus to mutate into more deadly variants. No one is safe until mass vaccinations are conducted on a worldwide basis.

The immediate dangers to human life were highlighted on Saturday, when Sydney’s recorded daily new infections again rose above 200 and yet another Delta outbreak in Brisbane forced the Queensland state government to implement a snap lockdown on the city and across the state’s surrounding southeastern region. Sudden eruptions of earlier COVID-19 clusters in recent weeks had also compelled state governments to impose short-term partial “stay at home” orders in Victoria, South Australia and Queensland.

These are the direct results of the refusal of the New South Wales (NSW) state government, backed heavily by its federal Liberal-National Coalition counterpart, to introduce even partial shutdown measures in Sydney for 10 days after the city’s Delta outbreak was first reported in the eastern suburbs on June 16.

Now the NSW government is worsening the risk of mass infection by instructing government schools to return to face-to-face classes for Year 12 students, and permitting construction sites to reopen throughout the city, except for the hardest-hit western and southwestern suburbs.

The mounting consequences of such policies, maintained at the insistence of the corporate elite, have been compounded by the abject failures and inadequacies of the hotel quarantine and vaccination operations presided over by the bipartisan National Cabinet. Even among the most vulnerable members of society, who were meant to be

prioritised months ago, 60 percent of those aged over 70 are not yet fully vaccinated, along with high proportions of aged and disability care workers.

The “reopening” plan outlined by Liberal-National Coalition Prime Minister Scott Morrison declares an intent to end the so-called current “suppression” Phase A of the health emergency, as soon as the vaccination rate, still languishing at less than 20 percent of the “eligible population,” reaches just 70 percent, perhaps by December.

The “eligible” population excludes those under 16, despite the months-old global evidence that the Delta mutant severely affects children. The 70 percent figure required for Phase B, even if reached, would actually represent just over half the total population.

Nevertheless, in Phase B, lockdowns would be made “unlikely” and vaccinated people would be given yet-to-be detailed exemptions from travel and other safety restrictions. Even in the present Phase A, Morrison said shutdowns would be confined to “early and stringent and short lockdowns if outbreaks occur.”

In Phase C, if and when the misleading official vaccination rate reached 80 percent, Morrison said “metropolitan-wide lockdowns” would “not be the expectation” and travel restrictions would largely be lifted for vaccinated people.

Under the false banner of “freedom,” Australia’s capitalist governments, like their equivalents in the US, UK, the European Union, Japan, Israel and elsewhere, are overriding the warnings of health experts because of the “economic cost” of safety measures—even though deaths will necessarily result.

This message was spelt out bluntly in Friday’s editorial in the *Australian Financial Review*. Backing the National Cabinet plan, it declared: “Zero tolerance of cases is now a roadblock on the way out. Overseas experience now shows that even with high vaccination levels an exit wave of cases—and deaths too—is unavoidable.”

Such allegedly unavoidable “exit waves” have already seen the pandemic resurge across the US, triggering daily new recorded infections of near 100,000, and the UK, where cases have topped 50,000 a day, despite vaccination levels similar to those proposed by the National Cabinet.

With typical contempt for epidemiologists and other medical experts, the financial newspaper said the “massive implications” of the “economic impact” of the pandemic were “too important to be left just to doctors.” Dovetailing with much-publicised anti-lockdown protests and agitation, the editorial expressed the hope that “impatience with lockdown-happy premiers” would “start to grow.”

From Morrison down, every government is trying to shift the blame for the crisis onto working class people, accusing them of “vaccine hesitancy”—when vaccines have been unavailable for months—and of

spreading infections via family gatherings, when most clusters have developed from non-essential workplaces and retail outlets that have been allowed to keep operating.

On the same day that the “roadmap” was unveiled, there was also a sharp turn towards escalating the police-state conditions that have been imposed on the western and southwestern suburbs of Sydney. The NSW government, in the name of Police Commissioner Mick Fuller, formally asked the federal government for 300 military personnel to assist police “enforcement activity,” particularly in these working-class suburbs.

The households in these suburbs have borne the brunt of Sydney’s infections because they are the homes of the increasingly casualised workers who are employed on the frontlines of the pandemic—from the overstretched and poorly-paid nurses and aged care workers to the super-exploited food delivery drivers and riders.

These are among the most impoverished areas of the country, where the social crisis and financial distress have been intensified by pandemic job losses, the cutting of welfare payments back to poverty levels and the denial of any government income support to temporary overseas workers and students. Requests for food parcels, emergency relief and financial help have soared in the past month.

As of Monday, soldiers will appear on the streets, patrolling with police, manning checkpoints and knocking on residents’ doors to see if they are adhering to isolation orders issued against infected people and their thousands of close contacts.

This is a blatant exercise in intimidation and suppression, under conditions of widespread anger over the already oppressive atmosphere created by a heavy police presence, including frequent helicopters buzzing overhead. Many residents in these areas come from refugee and recent immigrant backgrounds, heightening the fears and alarm caused by this operation.

More than 13,000 military personnel have been mobilised in similar operations since the pandemic began. This is also a bipartisan policy. The largest deployment thus far occurred at the request of the state Labor Party government in Victoria during its disastrous “second wave” in the second half of last year.

But the Sydney operation takes the growing militarisation of society to a new stage. It is specifically targeting the city’s working class heartlands, making clear the repressive agenda of cracking down on social unrest and conditioning workers and youth to the sight of troops on home soil.

Like the 2019–20 bushfire disaster, during which the Morrison government mobilised 3,000 military reservists, warships and planes, the Sydney operation also highlights the acute lack of public health and other civilian resources.

As numbers of community and welfare organisations are asking: Why are hundreds of soldiers being deployed in working class areas, not public health workers to assist people and clarify the “stay at home” and mask-wearing orders?

The Morrison government has even militarised the vaccine program, placing an army general in charge. There is no proposal from the National Cabinet to allocate the billions of dollars necessary for adequate epidemic quarantine and protection, health care and aged care, despite the breakdowns that have already occurred in these chronically-underfunded and over-stretched services.

Instead, military spending has been boosted—to \$575 billion over a decade—to create a force to suppress domestic unrest as well as to prepare for war, and more than \$400 billion has been handed to big business in support packages, low-cost loans, investment incentives

and tax concessions, helping the corporate elite to restructure their enterprises at the expense of workers under the cover of the COVID crisis.

Throughout the pandemic, the federal Labor Party opposition led by Anthony Albanese has provided the Coalition government with “constructive” support, while shifting its own policies in an ever-more pro-business direction, including by embracing the government’s sweeping tax cuts for the wealthiest layers of society. Likewise in NSW, Labor leader Chris Minns has provided unwavering backing for the Coalition government of Premier Gladys Berejiklian.

The same goes for the trade unions, which have opposed lockdown measures and worked hand-in-glove with the employers and the governments to impose cuts to jobs, wages and working conditions.

The Socialist Equality Party, which has been alone in advancing the independent interests of the working class throughout this crisis, issued a statement on June 3, 2020 in response to a previous “recovery roadmap.”

Entitled, “Oppose the premature lifting of COVID-19 safety restrictions!” it declared: “Via decrees agreed by the so-called national cabinet, Liberal-National and Labor governments alike are gambling with the lives of the population. They are announcing accelerated ‘reopening’ measures almost daily. In their haste, they are sweeping aside previous timetables, long before the impact of the earlier lifting of restrictions has been revealed.”

That warning has been confirmed over and over. Against the dictates of the financial oligarchs and their political and industrial servants, the working class must assert its own interests, for the protection of lives and livelihoods. Genuine working-class organisations, rank-and-file committees, completely independent of the thoroughly pro-business unions, must be built to prevent infection, sickness and death, and combat the corporate-union offensive on jobs and conditions.

Above all, the fight against the pandemic necessarily involves a struggle of workers against the ruling class and its grip over economic and political life. It is a fight against capitalism and for socialism—the restructuring of society on the basis of social need, not private profit and wealth accumulation.



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