

Australian governments rush to accelerate reopening “roadmap” despite Delta outbreaks spreading

Mike Head
3 August 2021

Just days after the Australian “National Cabinet” announced a premature “roadmap” to end COVID-19 lockdowns, government leaders are laying out plans to further speed up the lifting of safety restrictions, even as outbreaks of the highly dangerous Delta variant continue to run out of control, threatening the populations of Sydney and Brisbane.

The push is being spearheaded by New South Wales (NSW) Premier Gladys Berejiklian, despite her Liberal-National Coalition state government being directly responsible for the spread of the infections in Sydney. After five weeks of partial lockdowns, more than 200 new cases are still being reported daily, and the total number of cases since the outbreak began on June 16 exceeds 4,000.

Berejiklian yesterday declared her government’s hope to lift the “stay at home” orders in Sydney by the end of the month if 50 percent of the state’s adult population is vaccinated by then, even with just one dose. That would be only about a third of the population, counting those under 16, even though the Delta mutation is hitting growing numbers of children in Australia, as it is internationally.

This “reopening” drive, just like the Berejiklian government’s refusal to shut down the city for 10 days after the outbreak erupted, is entirely motivated by the demands of the financial elite for workers to be fully pushed back into workplaces in order to generate profits, regardless of the health consequences.

“Today I want to talk about kids getting back to school and workers getting back to work,” Berejiklian told a media conference on Monday.

Yesterday’s editorial in the *Australian Financial Review* underscored the corporate message. It denounced the National Cabinet roadmap as being too slow and effectively demanded that governments defy the advice of health experts. “As throughout the pandemic, Australia’s political leaders have again deferred to the ultra-cautious health advice, based on epidemiological modelling,” it declared.

Berejiklian’s 50 percent target is far below even the 70 percent threshold set out in last Friday’s “roadmap” for reducing the likelihood of lockdowns. That 70 percent figure

itself represents only 56 percent of the population yet Berejiklian’s government is proceeding with the clear backing of its federal Coalition counterpart, led by Prime Minister Scott Morrison, who yesterday ramped up his calls for people to learn to “live with the virus.”

A concerted effort is underway to condition public opinion to accept the supposed need for deaths in any “exit strategy.” At Morrison’s media conference yesterday, the federal chief medical officer Paul Kelly said: “We do need to accept that there will be cases. We need to accept that there will be hospitalisations, there will be ICU [intensive care unit] admissions and there will be deaths.”

For days, the NSW government has been already undercutting the limited health orders in Sydney by granting ever-greater numbers of exemptions to employers. Factory workers report being instructed to return to workplaces in industries that are far from “essential.”

Construction sites have been reopened as well, except in eight western and southwestern local government areas, where the predominantly working class populations are bearing the main burden of infections, as well as being subjected to saturation surveillance and harassment by police, now reinforced by military troops.

In a show of force, soldiers are patrolling streets, knocking on doors to enforce “stay at home” orders and maintaining a visible presence at vaccination centres, where there have been long queues, amid widespread anger over the continuing lack of access to vaccines.

Year 12 school students and their teachers in Sydney have been told to return to classrooms by the middle of the month, regardless of the proven dangers to young people and mounting opposition among students as well as teachers. The government’s promise to inoculate the students with one vaccine dose by then, even if delivered, will obviously not protect them in time.

Far from taking action to halt this offensive, the Labor Party and trade unions are backing it, in line with Labor’s majority role in the National Cabinet, a de facto coalition government. Their role is typified by the Construction Forestry Mining and

Energy Union (CFMEU), which has joined hands with the construction employers and property developers to call for construction workers to be added to the list of those permitted to leave the eight western and southwestern areas to work on sites.

This flies in the face of statements by NSW Chief Health Officer Dr Kerry Chant about high levels of transmission in workplaces, including meat processing plants, distribution centres and freight companies. Earlier attempts by governments to blame households for the spread of infections have been exposed by the reality that workplaces are the major sources.

Although the Delta outbreak in Brisbane has yet to exceed 20 new infections per day, it is still spreading and the total number of active cases has reached 100. Hospitals are already under stress with more than 400 healthcare professionals having to quarantine because they are close contacts of students infected at a number of schools. As one affected doctor told the media, school children have become “superspreaders” of the disease. As a result, the Queensland state Labor Party government has been forced to extend a limited three-day city shut down for a week.

The kinds of calculations being made in ruling circles was indicated by a report in the *Australian Financial Review* yesterday about modelling being performed to gauge how many daily deaths Australians would “tolerate” after governments lifted restrictions.

According to the report, the modelling by Accenture, a global consulting giant, “makes a crucial assumption that Australians would tolerate an average of 20 COVID-19-related deaths a day,” and 10,000 new infections daily, once vaccination rates were above 70 percent.

This modelling is reportedly based on what has been happening in the US and UK, where infection rates are soaring again because the Biden and Johnson governments have presided over similar corporate-driven reopening operations.

Professor Jodie McVernon from the Doherty Institute, which produced the report that underpinned last Friday’s National Cabinet “roadmap,” yesterday warned that at 50–60 percent vaccination, there would still be “rapidly growing outbreaks that would be very difficult to control.”

The Doherty Institute report itself contains disturbing scenarios, which have gone unreported or misleadingly reported in the corporate media.

At a vaccination rate of 50 percent of the adult population, the modelling estimates 10,311 people would die within six months following community transmission if there were only minor social distancing restrictions and “partial” effectiveness of tracing, testing, isolating and quarantine measures. There would be about 1.2 million infections and over 48,000 hospital admissions, with more than 11,000 patients in ICUs.

Even at the National Cabinet’s 70 percent inoculation level to enter “Phase B,” making lockdowns “unlikely,” 3,563 people would die, more than 600,000 people would suffer infections,

over 22,000 would be hospitalised and more than 5,000 would be in ICUs.

Media reports, however, indicate that Berejiklian’s government has drawn up a plan by which, once the 50 percent mark is reached, all students would be back in classrooms, pubs and clubs would be allowed to host outdoor dining and gyms could reopen.

Because of the federal government’s delayed and chaotic vaccination program, less than two-thirds of the country’s over-50s population, who were supposed to be prioritised, have received even a first dose of a vaccine. The vaccination rates are much lower among younger adults and children who are the most likely to be infected and to transmit the Delta virus. Rates are also highest in wealthier areas, and lowest in working class areas, where the populations are younger and less likely to be able to access doses.

In Sydney, the contact tracing system is already unable to cope with the volume of cases, exposing the claims of Morrison for many months that it was “gold standard” and therefore no lockdowns were needed. Since July 25, “mystery” case numbers every day have been greater than those traced to a known case or cluster.

Because of the severe effects of the Delta strain, more people are in Sydney’s hospital intensive care wards than during the peak of last year’s second-wave outbreak in the neighbouring state of Victoria, which had substantially more active cases and killed 768 people, but involved the original wild COVID-19 virus.

At the peak of hospitalisations last August, the Victorian government reported 675 people in hospital. Of those, 44 were in ICUs and 29 were on ventilation. According to NSW Health data on Monday, 232 COVID-19-positive patients were in hospital, 54 of whom were in ICUs and 25 on ventilation.

Governments repeatedly claim that Australia has one of the best hospital systems in the world, but hospitals in both Sydney and Brisbane are under such stress that so-called elective surgeries have had to be cancelled.

Infections are developing in aged care homes, which became epicentres of deaths last year. In Sydney’s inner-west, the Wyoming Nursing Home has had 18 patients and two staff infected. About 83 percent of the residents and 75 percent of the staff had been vaccinated, but the Delta virus still spread.

Tragically, two more people died in Sydney yesterday, taking the outbreak total to 17 and the national pandemic toll to 927. One of yesterday’s victims was a young man in his 20s, who died at home in southwestern Sydney.



To contact the WWSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact