

Delta outbreak spreading across Australia as infections and deaths rise

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With the exception of the Victorian coronavirus crisis of late 2020, much of Australia is in the grip of one of its worst coronavirus crises with Thursday and Friday among the grimmest days since the pandemic began early last year. On top of mounting infections and deaths, the geographical spread of the virus has expanded dramatically, into cities, states and regional areas where there was previously minimal to no community transmission being recorded.

The New South Wales (NSW) state Liberal-National government yesterday reported 262 new locally-acquired infections, the vast majority of them in Sydney, as well as five deaths, the most since the current outbreak began. The record number of cases was immediately surpassed, with 291 infections announced this morning.

The same mass spread that is resulting in hundreds of infections every day in Australia's largest city is threatened in many other parts of the country. An estimated 15 million out of a national population of 25 million people are now under some form of lockdown measure.

A seven-day lockdown of Victoria, the country's second-most populous state, was reimposed on Thursday, after new community cases were detected. Restrictions remain in place in parts of Queensland, including the capital Brisbane, with infections being recorded each day. The island state of Tasmania registered its first COVID-positive result in 12 months.

The scenario unfolding of an increasingly unchecked, nationwide surge of Delta, among the most infectious variants of the coronavirus, was both foreseeable and foreseen. The months-long warnings of epidemiologists that governments had created a perfect storm for a major outbreak and that immediate action, including stringent lockdown measures, were required to prevent one after cases were first identified, are being confirmed.

The NSW government has been at the forefront of a

ruling-class campaign against the necessary public health measures, aimed at safeguarding corporate profits. NSW Premier Gladys Berejiklian, acting with the full support of the state Labor opposition, and in collaboration with the national cabinet, composed of state and territory leaders, most of them Labor, as well as the federal government, has persistently refused to implement lockdown policies required to curb the Sydney outbreak.

For ten days, when cases were first detected on June 16, no restrictions were put in place at all, except for expanded mask mandates. Belated, localised and limited stay-at-home measures, which were subsequently instituted as the outbreak spiralled out of control, continue to fall short of the measures required to halt transmission.

The government, having blamed working-class residents, especially of south-west Sydney, for the consequences of its own criminally-negligent policies, has acknowledged this week that workplaces are the key drivers of transmission. But the vast majority of them, including many non-essential retail outlets, remain in full operation.

This includes in eight working-class local government areas (LGAs) of west and south-west Sydney, that are supposedly the subject of more stringent measures because they have been epicentres of transmission. While the areas have been flooded with police officers and some 300 military personnel, a host of exemptions, covering non-essential factories, retail, the postal service and more, have been granted.

At least 12 workers at a Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC) restaurant in the south-western suburb of Punchbowl are among the latest cases, with the store listed as a potential exposure site for at least a week. This morning, Premier Berejiklian declared that transmission was growing at an especially fast rate in the nearby suburb of Bankstown, a lot of it driven by shopping centres. Rather than announce any greater restrictions, however, the government

indicated a further boost to the police presence.

The vast majority of new cases announced each day are not linked to an existing cluster, indicating unknown chains of transmission, and were in the community for all or part of their infectious period, meaning further contagion. Of the 4,581 infections since the outbreak began, 1,488, or fully 30 percent, are of unknown origin. As many as 200 of today's cases, well over two thirds, were in the community while potentially contagious.

The figures demonstrate that NSW contact tracing, previously touted as the "gold standard" by Berejiklian, Prime Minister Scott Morrison and the corporate media, has broken down.

The claims that the virus can be isolated to the eight working-class LGAs are also a transparent fraud. The outbreak began in the city's relatively-affluent eastern suburbs, and has since spread through to every area of Sydney. Of today's infections for instance, 30 were from the central Sydney local health district, 24 are from Nepean Blue Mountains, 13 from South Eastern Sydney and five from Northern Sydney. The localised focus, in addition to scapegoating the working-class for the crisis, is simply to avoid the city and state-wide restrictions demanded by medical experts.

The refusal to implement lockdown measures outside of Sydney, or to enforce a nominal travel ban between the city and regional areas, has resulted in the extension of the crisis elsewhere in NSW. The Upper Hunter and Newcastle areas, several hours north of Sydney, were placed under lockdown yesterday after several infections were detected, followed by 12 more today. COVID-19 fragments have also been found in sewage samples from central NSW, including the towns of Dubbo and Armidale, despite no new cases being detected there.

The NSW government has abandoned any pretence of attempting to eliminate transmission. The official discussion all but accepts that Delta is virtually endemic in Sydney, even though it is less than two months since there were no locally-acquired cases of COVID in the city. The entire focus is on lifting restrictions, including through the recent resumption of construction activity and plans to push year 12 students and teachers into face-to-face teaching.

The government has signalled a planned reopening as soon as woefully-low vaccination levels reach 50 percent of the eligible population. This would account for only around a third of the total population. It would exclude all children under 16 and many young adults, even though they have recorded the highest infection rates.

This threatens to create a full-blown catastrophe. Five deaths were announced yesterday, and another one today, taking the total to 22. Earlier this week, a 27-year-old worker, with no underlying health conditions, died suddenly from COVID in his home. There are currently 304 people in hospital with COVID-19, 50 of them in intensive care and 22 requiring ventilation, meaning the tragic fatalities will continue.

The criminally-negligent official response is not limited to NSW or the Liberal-Nationals. Yesterday, the Victorian Labor government announced a seven-day lockdown, less than a week after previous restrictions were lifted. The reopening was carried out under conditions in which Delta infections were still being recorded, though supposedly among people already in isolation, and involved the resumption of retail, restaurant and gym operations and a return to face-to-face teaching.

In the past two days, 12 infections have been recorded in Melbourne. At least three of them are unlinked, indicating that Delta may have continued circulating after the previous lockdown was lifted. Schools are again being impacted, with a student at the Warringa Park special-needs school among the latest positive results. A teacher at the Al-Taqwa College in the city's west also tested positive, forcing 300 staff and more than 2,000 students into isolation and prompting the closure of two other schools that were potentially exposed.

In the north-eastern state of Queensland, schools have also been drivers of transmission. Students account for 38 of the state's recent 79 cases, and four teachers have been infected.

As is the case internationally, Australian governments are pursuing a policy that is homicidal in design and intent. They are reopening schools, forcing workers into unsafe places of employment and rejecting pleas from epidemiologists for sharper restrictions, all to ensure that the largest corporations continue to make massive profits. This program, of allowing the virus to spread, will continue to result in mass infections and growing numbers of deaths. The alternative is the independent intervention of the working class, for safety measures, and for a society in which social need is the governing principle.



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