

Amid Sydney crisis, workers and youth speak on social hardship, oppose police/military deployment

Our reporters
6 August 2021

Sydney, Australia's largest city, is in the grips of its worst COVID-19 outbreak yet, registering a record of more than 300 new infections today, as well as all-time high rates of hospitalisation and serious illness.

The outbreak, which has spread elsewhere in the state of New South Wales (NSW) and other cities and states, is a direct product of government policies. The NSW Liberal-National government, acting in concert with state and federal administrations, Labor and conservative alike, has rejected calls for workplace shutdowns and other necessary measures to contain the virus, because of the impact they would have on corporate profit.

The government is pressing ahead with plans for a further "reopening" of the economy, as early as the end of the month, despite infections and deaths sharply rising. At the same time, it has scapegoated working-class residents of Sydney's western and south-western suburbs, for the crisis that its pro-business program has created.

Some 300 military personnel have been deployed to those areas, along with an additional 1,000 extra police. They are patrolling eight working-class local government areas, knocking on doors, and intimidating residents, in Fairfield, Canterbury-Bankstown, Liverpool, Cumberland, Blacktown, Parramatta, Georges River, and Campbelltown.

Last Friday, one Twitter user posted a video of a military helicopter in what appears to be a suburban park in Sydney's south-western suburbs with soldiers and police patrolling the area.

No additional community workers or medical personnel have been dispatched to the areas, which are centres of a social crisis caused by decades of cuts to jobs, wages and conditions by employers, and the gutting of social spending by Labor and Liberal-National governments.

The situation on the ground was indicated by an anonymous paramedic in south-west Sydney, who wrote an article in the *Guardian* late last week. The worker described a "dystopian world that used to be my workplace: hospitals in crisis and nearing capacity. The tension in the air is thick, staff morale has never been lower and, despite words of encouragement from

management, the only thing keeping us afloat is joking about how we're drowning. Most of us are feeling anxious."

It was increasingly common, the worker said, for paramedics to attend households in the area where entire families were infected with the disease, and had been fearful to seek medical treatment, or had limited access because of language issues and poor official messaging. In some cases, the people have been so sick they have perished at home.

The official response to the crisis has a clear class character, with Sydney increasingly divided along social lines. This was underlined by an article in the *Daily Telegraph* last week, which featured comments from residents of the affluent Potts Point suburb in the city's east, complaining that the movement restrictions in south-west and western Sydney meant there was nobody to take away their rubbish.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to residents in the affected suburbs.

George, a 20-year-old student in south-west Sydney, said: "The rock and the hard place are wanting to stay home, be responsible, contain the virus and listen to the government. But staying home is a drain on our resources and we aren't being paid enough to survive without work.

"Right now, my parents get the highest form of emergency fund pay out they are eligible for, only about \$675 a week. Our bills for a five-person family are roughly \$1,000 per quarter for each utility, water, electricity, gas, plus the mortgage. We're having to consider taking out another mortgage on the home. I have to dip into my savings to help out, which I was going to use to pay off my university fees.

"Two weeks ago, a friend of mine got COVID from his mother, who is in healthcare. He is recovering now. He is lucky he doesn't live with vulnerable people. He applied for a vaccination a couple of times and wasn't eligible, even though his mother works in healthcare. Then when he did get approved, the appointment was a couple months away and, in the meantime, he got COVID. I think his mother is alright. He's my age, 20."

Referring to the official response, George said the state and federal "Labor [oppositions] are complicit. They have put up

weak, at best, messages regarding the mishandling of the vaccine rollout and the business-first approach of lockdowns at a state level. It's transparent. They are just worried about the economy and big business rather than people's lives.

"I know for a fact there is an increased police presence, and it's to intimidate people into social distancing. The means of achieving these goals are wrong and threatening to people who live here. It is also a message for any would-be dissenters and revolutionaries to keep this in the back of your minds the next time you oppose the people in power."

Kobra is a 22-year-old student who lives in the south-west area of Campbelltown. She explained: "A few weeks ago, my sister and I were at the petrol station in our local area, and she saw two policemen on horseback stopped at the traffic light. After that we did have a few more police cars in the area.

"They're not acting in the interests of the working class. The government only listens to those people in Australia who are interested in getting the economy started again and getting big businesses open. We expect the government to know at this point how serious things get, and how rapidly things escalate, especially when it comes to a pandemic.

"We have a lot of people who are refugees here and come from countries devastated by war and violence. The presence of the army and military on the street can be very triggering. If it's practical, then I could see it outweighing the adverse effects, but from my perspective it doesn't have any use other than to invoke fear in people and make them more confused, and even more frustrated.

"The company where my brother works has been closed down. Both of my brothers work there, and they don't have any source of income, so they're relying on government benefits. For a lot of people, it's a lifeline, and something they desperately need to keep going. It would be really good if we could have those rank-and-file committees and get proper benefits and help for those who need it."

Keith works in IT and lives in Blacktown in western Sydney. "The lockdowns have been too little, too late," he said. "The federal government is a joke from a leadership point of view. I can't think of anything they have done right. The Labor Party isn't any better. They really are incorporated into government policy."

Commenting on the military deployment, Keith said, "I think they are asking the army in because they haven't got enough health people to do it. They haven't been spending enough money on health services."

Keith said that the formation of independent rank-and-file committees of workers, to enforce safety measures and fight for the social interests of ordinary people, "would work really well. The number of small businesses that are going to the wall because of the lockdown is terrible. They are the ones who need support, not the Harvey Normans of this world. Payments need to be made to those who need it, not the multi-millions to the major corporations.

"People will keep on dying until this is sorted out. It's not going to be sorted out by the politicians. It's going to be workers."

Rizhna is a 35-year-old casual teacher with two young children in Sydney's western suburbs. She is currently out of work but does not qualify for financial help because her husband runs a café, which is now limited to take-away service. He also is not eligible for government assistance.

"The government say they will help people financially if they have lost their jobs. But some of my friends have waited on the phone for five hours plus and they don't get anything. It's a ridiculous amount of time wasted," Rizhna noted.

"I don't know where the premier, Gladys Berejiklian, is coming from. It doesn't make sense sending so many kids back to school in two weeks for face-to-face learning when they're not vaccinated. They can spread the virus easily to anyone they come across. Everything the government says is rubbish.

"They say the way forward is to get vaccinated. I had an appointment to get vaccinated but it was cancelled because they say students have priority. Australia is way, way wealthier than Mexico but there they are ahead of us in how many are vaccinated. It's embarrassing. I think the whole thing is a business. Do you know how much profit Pfizer has made this year—\$49 billion!

"The whole thing is very sad. I feel sorry for the kids. My son has lived most of his life under COVID-19. He hasn't been out. It's very depressing."

Fadia lives and works in south-western Sydney and teaches at a public school. Many of her fellow teachers are opposed to the return of planned return of Year 12 students to in-person learning. "Teachers don't want to go back, and neither do the parents or students," she said.

"Many of our teachers travel from all over the Sydney area to teach here. They are all scared. There are 120 girls in the Year 12 cohort at my school and some of them are refugees. They are already disadvantaged in this area. This just feels like another kick in the teeth. They should have just scrapped the HSC [final school year exams].

"Most people in the area feel we are being discriminated against. My whole family is affected by the lockdown. This morning, when my children went to the shops, there were police all over the place. The western areas are being singled out for lockdown, while the rest of Sydney is not. Families living in small flats, with tiny balconies, confined space! This lockdown is unbearable for them. Don't lock down just one area, it's not fair."



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact