

Sydney's outbreak spreads across NSW as Australia's COVID crisis continues

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A major coronavirus outbreak, which continues to result in hundreds of new infections in Sydney each day, is spreading across the state of New South Wales (NSW), the most-populous in the country, with growing numbers of cases and exposure sites in regional areas.

The extension of the highly-contagious Delta variant throughout NSW further demonstrates that the outbreak is a national crisis, not confined to one city. Over the past week, the virus had already resulted in dozens of cases in Victoria and Queensland, which neighbour NSW, prompting limited snap lockdowns in both states.

The pro-business policies of state, territory and federal governments, Labor and Liberal-National alike, have imperiled millions of people with infection by Delta, a particularly virulent and deadly strain, which has resulted in COVID catastrophes in countries such as India and Indonesia and ongoing surges in the US, Britain and Europe. As is the case there, public health has been subordinated to profit interests, with governments rejecting calls from medical experts for stringent lockdown measures, because of the impact they would have on business activities.

Late last week, cases were detected in the Newcastle and Hunter regions several hours north of Sydney. Greater Newcastle alone has a population of close to half a million. Throughout the pandemic, there had been only a handful of infections in the areas, which include a host of working-class suburbs. The latest outbreak there has already resulted in 30 infections, including a record 13 today, with transmission continuing despite the announcement of a limited lockdown on Thursday.

As is the case throughout NSW, numbers of the cases are unlinked, so sources of transmission are unknown. There are dozens of exposure sites, with 11 more added to the list yesterday. The dangers of a broader spread were underscored by a biosecurity lockdown of an inner-city Newcastle hotel yesterday, and the announcement that potentially-infected people visited several sites at the University of Newcastle, including one of its main libraries.

Students in the university's International House residential

college were forced into isolation after NSW Health announced that anyone who lives on campus and has been there between July 28 and August 7 is considered a "close contact" of infected individuals.

Yesterday, Tamworth, a city of more than 40,000, located in inland northern NSW was thrown into a week-long lockdown, after it was discovered that a Newcastle resident had visited last Wednesday, and had gone to a host of public venues, including stores and cafes. Armidale, another city in the northern tablelands, was placed under restrictions several days ago, after two positive cases were detected, also linked to Newcastle.

Also in northern NSW, the coastal town of Byron Bay and surrounding areas, including Lismore, the Richmond Valley and Ballina Shire, were placed into a snap lockdown. A man traveled to the area from Sydney late last month, where he is thought to have contracted the virus, meaning Delta may have been circulating in the region undetected for close to two weeks.

The NSW authorities are asserting in a number of cases, including the Byron Bay outbreak, that the spread is the result of individuals violating health directives. The strategy is the same that has been used in Sydney, where working-class residents of the city's west and south-west have been accused, without a shred of public evidence, of widespread rule-breaking.

In reality, the extension of the virus crisis throughout the state has been warned of since the Sydney outbreak began on June 16. As the state capital, Sydney has myriad links to regional towns and cities across NSW. The state Liberal-National government has refused to enforce any containment line around Sydney, instead merely issuing directives against the city's residents travelling elsewhere. Even these rules contain a host of exemptions, especially for work-related activities.

The same calculations, placing profit ahead of health and lives, have allowed the virus to spread out of control within Sydney.

Today's toll of 356 new infections, most in the state

capital, is the worst since the outbreak began.

Unlinked cases, where the authorities do not know the source of infection, have also reached record levels, accounting for 209 of the cases announced this morning. They now represent more than a third of the total since the outbreak began, signalling a breakdown of contact-tracing efforts. As many as 254 of the people infected were potentially contagious while in the community, indicating that widespread transmission is underway and case numbers will continue to grow.

The NSW government has consistently rejected calls for a stringent, city-wide lockdown, in line with business demands for the economy to remain “open.” Instead it has imposed harsher restrictions on working-class suburbs, where the virus has spread widely because of a high number of essential and factory workers and densely-populated households. Those measures were extended to Penrith and surrounding suburbs over the weekend, which joined vast swathes of western and southwestern Sydney under the heightened measures.

The restrictions in the working-class areas include intensive police and military surveillance and harassment, and limitations on individual movement. Most workplaces, however, remain open. A nominal ban on workers from the areas travelling elsewhere to their places of employment was rendered meaningless as soon as it was announced, because of a host of exemptions, including for retail.

With the imposition of the measures in Penrith, the government has shifted from placing entire local government areas encompassing multiple suburbs under the measures, to implementing them on a postcode-by-postcode basis. The purpose is for restrictions to be introduced and then lifted, depending on case number fluctuations. Such localised measures have repeatedly failed to contain the virus throughout the pandemic.

This irrationality from a public health standpoint is underscored by the growing number of cases in areas not subject to the measures. While southwest and western Sydney still account for the majority of cases each day, the proportion being registered elsewhere is growing. Some 40 of today’s cases were recorded in the city centre and inner west, 38 in southeastern Sydney, 24 in the Nepean and Blue Mountains and seven in northern Sydney. In other words, transmission is occurring in every direction.

Tragically, there were four further deaths today, bringing the total since the outbreak began to 32. The figure will grow, with 357 COVID patients in hospital, 60 of them in intensive care units and 28 requiring ventilation to continue breathing.

There are growing fears about the capacity of the state’s chronically-underfunded hospitals. Hundreds of health

workers have been forced into isolation, and there have been outbreaks at hospitals, including Liverpool Hospital, where six people have died. Yesterday, NSW authorities revealed that some intensive care patients were being transferred to Wollongong Hospital, south of Sydney, indicating capacity issues, especially in medical facilities in the west and southwest.

In the *Sydney Morning Herald* this morning an anonymous doctor from western Sydney warned: “NSW is almost certainly on the precipice of a massive deterioration. Contact tracers are overwhelmed, with reporting of infection hot spots lagging by days. The whole strategy of relying on contact tracing for infection control is failing, or indeed has failed.”

Despite the clear dangers, the NSW government is ruling out greater lockdown measures, and lifting the inadequate restrictions already in place. Premier Gladys Berejiklian has repeatedly declared that lockdown measures could be eased once the state reaches a target of having administered six million vaccine doses.

This target was initially presented as 50 percent of the state population having been fully-vaccinated. Even that would be far below levels required to reduce transmission. Berejiklian and other government ministers, however, have since made clear that their only metric is the total number of jobs delivered, meaning the restrictions could be reduced even with fewer than half of the population fully-inoculated.

This is in line with a broader push by governments and the corporate elite for an end to all safety measures and a full “reopening” of the economy, along the lines of the US and Britain. The policy is not limited to the Liberal-Nationals, but is also fully supported by the Labor Party, at the federal and state levels.

The Queensland Labor government yesterday lifted a limited lockdown of the southeast of the state, including the capital, Brisbane, despite ongoing Delta infections being recorded.

Likewise, the Labor administration in Victoria overturned lockdown measures in the rural areas of the state, even though it is possible that the virus is circulating there. Dozens of cases are still being recorded in Melbourne, the state capital, where a lockdown was prematurely ended in late July, only to be reimposed last week.



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