

Form workers' rank-and-file committees to fight homicidal pandemic policy of the Australian ruling class!

Socialist Equality Party (Australia)
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Amid the rapidly escalating COVID crisis, Australian governments at the state and federal level, Labor and Liberal-National Coalition alike, are pursuing the same homicidal, profit-driven program that has resulted in mass illness and death around the world.

The ruling elite and its political representatives, including the trade unions, are allowing the Delta variant, among the most virulent and deadly in the world, to spread, threatening the health and lives of millions of people.

Like their counterparts internationally, Australian governments insists that measures necessary to halt the spread, including workplace closures and stringent lockdowns cannot be countenanced, because of the impact they would have on big-business profit. The mantras are the same: it is necessary for ordinary people to "learn to live with the virus," and everything must be done to "reopen the economy."

This is a program that will not only result in the indefinite continuation of the present outbreak, but in tens of thousands of deaths and hundreds of thousands or even millions of infections, in the months and years to come.

The Socialist Equality Party calls on workers, along with students, young people, and concerned layers of the middle class, to resist this policy, which can only be described as social murder.

Rank-and-file committees, completely independent of the unions, must be established, to halt production in those areas where the virus is spreading out of control and to enforce safety measures everywhere else, including in essential industries. This must be linked to a fight for the social interests of the working class, including full compensation for those thrown out of work, to be paid for by the profits of the corporate elite, and a massive expansion of the crisis-ridden and chronically-underfunded public health system.

The situation in Sydney is only the starkest expression of what is being prepared everywhere. In less than two months, an outbreak that began with two infections on June 16 is now resulting in more than 350 cases per day. The tragic toll of 37 fatalities is set to grow, with the number of COVID patients in hospital approaching 400, of which 62 are in intensive care.

With almost 6,000 active cases, the virus is circulating in every part of the city. Roughly two-fifths of infections since the outbreak began are classified as "under investigation," meaning that the authorities do not know the source of transmission. Over the past week, however, cases "under investigation" comprise more than half of new infections. Contact-tracing in New South Wales (NSW), previously touted as the "gold standard" by state Premier Gladys Berejiklian, Prime Minister Scott Morrison and the corporate media is breaking down.

The NSW government, with the full support of the state Labor opposition, and the entire political establishment, is pursuing a brutal class policy. Its intransigent and ongoing refusal to implement necessary

lockdown measures has allowed the virus to spread, especially in the working-class areas of western and south-western Sydney. The government's response has been to blame the victims of its own policies, accusing workers and youth of being responsible for the growth in cases, on the basis of wholly unsubstantiated assertions of widespread violations of restrictions.

In addition to scapegoating, these claims have been used to justify a massive police deployment to the working-class suburbs, and the roll-out of hundreds of military personnel. Paramedics have described nightmarish scenarios of entire families stricken by the disease and patients being on the cusp of death before leaving their home. But no additional health resources are being provided, only law-and-order repression. Charities are reporting a massive increase in demand, including for food relief, with those thrown out of work forced to survive on paltry federal government assistance, capped at \$750 per week.

The rejection of containment measures around Sydney has allowed the virus to spread throughout the state, with cases emerging in regional towns and cities across NSW. Already, dangerous outbreaks have emerged in the states of Queensland and Victoria, but a further expansion is all but inevitable.

Under these conditions, the entire focus of governments is on their "reopening" agenda. As it has been throughout the pandemic, the NSW government is at the forefront of this drive. Its representatives, including Berejiklian, are stating that nothing can be done to halt transmission, because of Delta's virulence.

This assertion, which defies science and the calls of epidemiologists for strict lockdown measures, is being used to insist that the population accept illness and death as the new normal. The NSW government has indicated that it will consider lifting the inadequate restrictions already in place, from the end of the month, based on a target of administering six million vaccine doses, regardless of the percentage of the population fully-vaccinated.

The target would mean that not even 50 percent of the adult population is fully-vaccinated. But even if half were, modelling from the Doherty Institute estimates that a national reopening at this level of inoculation would result in over 10,000 deaths within six months as a result of community transmission. Assuming 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.

This is not just the policy of the NSW government, but of the entire ruling elite and all of its political instruments. The silence of Labor leader Anthony Albanese since the NSW outbreak has been deafening, while the state Labor opposition has marched in lockstep with Berejiklian.

It must be stated that this has been the program of all of the governments

and the Australian corporations from the outset of the pandemic. The national cabinet, composed of the state and territory leaders, most of them from the Labor Party and the federal Coalition, rejected a strategy of eradicating the coronavirus at the beginning of the COVID crisis, because it would be too costly, thereby creating the conditions for successive outbreaks.

The lockdowns of March 2020 were implemented only because of the demands of workers, teachers and health experts. Further restrictions, however, will no longer be tolerated. Speaking on behalf of the Australian capitalist class, the Murdoch media cites the necessity to overcome the population's "obsession with zero infections" as the path to end all future lockdowns.

This is what the national cabinet is seeking to do, having adopted a "roadmap" for reopening, based on vaccination rates, and a rejection of lockdown measures altogether. At the 70 percent inoculation level, "Phase B" would start, making lockdowns "unlikely." The Doherty modelling, upon which the plan is based, predicts 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.

More and more, the call is for COVID to be treated like the flu. Aside from the far greater risk of hospitalisation and death, COVID has potentially-lifelong, catastrophic consequences for those who survive. Last month, a major study led by Imperial College London, found that people hospitalised with COVID suffered a substantial cognitive decline, averaging a reduction of around seven IQ points for those who were ventilated and four for those who were not. The former figure is worse than for those who have suffered a stroke or lead poisoning. Even those who were not hospitalised showed "small" but "statistically significant" performance deficits.

Children and young adults, who make up the majority of cases in the latest outbreak, are not exempt from these disastrous effects, nor from long-COVID and other debilitating illnesses associated with infection.

Under these conditions, there is growing opposition, among students and teachers, to the planned resumption of face-to-face teaching in Sydney, first with year 12 students then more broadly, as well as to dangerous school re-openings in other states such as Queensland.

There is also a mounting recognition that the virus is being spread through workplaces, and that the refusal of governments to close them or to implement safety measures is motivated by the defence of profit. Massive anger exists, not only to the Berejiklian government, but to the entire political establishment.

However, this sentiment must find organised expression, independent of the trade unions which function as the industrial police for governments and companies. Throughout the pandemic, they have supported the transfer of hundreds of billions of dollars in public funds to big business, while presiding over mass sackings and cuts to workers' conditions.

Amid the current resurgence, unions have backed employers' demands for exemptions from safety measures for a host of industries, including construction. When cases emerge at a workplace, the unions cover them up and do everything possible to ensure continued production.

This underscores the necessity for independent rank-and-file committees in all workplaces, from the factories, to the schools, hospitals, retail and more broadly, including in working-class neighbourhoods and communities. They will be a forum for workers to discuss the issues they confront, formulate their demands, take concrete action and link up with other sections of the working class.

The Socialist Equality Party proposes the following demands:

* Close all non-essential workplaces in areas where the Delta variant is spreading, including in Sydney! Workers lives must not be sacrificed to profit!

* Workers in essential production must be provided with full PPE and provisions made for safe distancing. If an infection occurs, production

must immediately be halted, and cannot resume until all those potentially-exposed to the virus have been tested, and the workers themselves, through their rank-and-file committee, deem it safe to return.

* No school re-openings wherever the virus is circulating! The lies that children and young people do not contract or become ill have been tragically refuted in thousands of deaths, including more than 100 in Indonesia every week. Schools have been centres of clusters time and again throughout the pandemic. Their reopening is aimed solely at facilitating business activity by forcing parents back to their places of employment.

* Full compensation for all workers who have lost their jobs during the pandemic! The poverty-level federal assistance currently being provided is aimed at further pauperising workers and the poor, and compelling people to work in unsafe conditions. Workers must be provided with their full pay, and the unemployed, including students, with a living wage to survive. This should be paid from the profits of the largest corporations, which have seen a record windfall throughout the pandemic, including through more than \$400 billion given to them by state, territory and federal governments.

* Hundreds of billions of dollars for the hospitals and healthcare! The pandemic has exposed an already crisis-ridden and underfunded system. Governments, which have slashed the sector for decades, have criminally refused to provide additional resources amid an unprecedented global pandemic, threatening the hospitals with being overwhelmed.

The realisation of these demands requires a political fight, that cannot be conducted at one workplace alone. A network of rank-and-file committees, across workplaces, industries and more broadly, must be developed to share information, develop the widest discussion, and to discuss concrete action to enforce demands, including industrial action.

This is part of a political struggle against the entire establishment, including the unions, and the capitalist profit-system itself. The pandemic has laid bare the fundamental conflict between the interests of working people the world over and a society dominated by the predatory interests of a tiny corporate oligarchy. The two principles, of social need and private profit, cannot be reconciled.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and its sister parties in the world Trotskyist movement advance a socialist perspective, aimed at reorganising society on a global scale. The measures required to eradicate the pandemic can only be carried out on the basis of the closest international collaboration of scientific experts, workers and the vast mass of the population, freed from the dictates of the corporate elite. This is also the only means of ensuring high-quality, free healthcare, education and the right to a permanent job with decent pay and secure conditions for all.

This requires the construction of a revolutionary leadership of the working class, in Australia and internationally, aimed at abolishing capitalism and establishing workers' governments to prepare the grounds for world socialism. We urge all workers, students and young people to contact the SEP and apply to join it today.



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