

Outbreaks hit workers and the vulnerable as Australia's COVID crisis intensifies

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The state of New South Wales (NSW) registered its highest tally of cases since an outbreak of the highly-infectious Delta strain of COVID-19 began in Sydney mid-last month, with 390 new infections announced this morning, along with two more tragic fatalities.

The number of infections is now reaching record levels multiple times a week. On Wednesday, for the first time, the seven-day rolling average of new cases surpassed 300. With the majority of infections announced each day being of people who were potentially-contagious while in the community, the case numbers are predicted to continue to soar. As many as 291 of the infections today fall into that category.

The deepening crisis, which is spreading to regional and rural areas, as well as to other states and territories, is an indictment of the NSW Liberal-National Coalition government and the entire political establishment. In line with a drumbeat from the corporate elite for an end to lockdowns and a turn towards the full “reopening” of the economy, the Coalition, with the full support of the state Labor opposition, has resisted the safety measures, including workplace closures, required to stem transmission.

The class character of the official response is becoming ever starker, as growing numbers of workers, the poor and the vulnerable are imperiled with the deadly-disease.

An outbreak at the Giant Steps special education school in Gladesville on the Lower North Shore has resulted in three staff members, seven students and eight of their family members contracting COVID. The school, which caters to children with severe autism, has been closed, while hundreds of pupils, teachers and their relatives have been forced into isolation.

Speaking to the *Sydney Morning Herald*, Autism Awareness Australia chief executive Nicole Rogerson condemned the federal government's shambolic vaccine rollout, noting that while the disabled and those who work

with them were supposed to have been on the priority 1b list for inoculation, “so many remain unvaccinated.”

Rogerson said that advocates in the sector had been “yelling from the rooftops for months” about the need for full inoculations, but this had not been carried out, even though “An outbreak like this is devastating but it's probably not surprising.” It remains unclear how many of the affected staff and students had been vaccinated.

The outbreak has underscored the recklessness of plans for a reopening of public schools, initially with students in Year 12. The state government is bussing some 24,000 pupils from the western and south-western suburbs to mass vaccine hubs, so that it can press ahead with this program amid widespread student and teacher opposition. Last night it was revealed that an infected person had been at the Qudos Bank Arena in Homebush, which is among the vaccine hubs being used for this purpose, the previous Tuesday, forcing thousands into isolation.

Yesterday alone, some 44 children aged under nine were among the positive cases. Close to 15 percent of infections during the past fortnight have been among this vulnerable demographic, while cases are soaring among teenagers and young adults. The infections, which can have catastrophic, life-long consequences, including tragic fatalities, are again refuting the lying claims that children were somehow less likely to contract and spread the virus, used to justify school reopenings.

Health workers are facing harrowing situations. Amid an outbreak in the mental health ward of Nepean Hospital, in Sydney's west, which has now resulted in at least ten cases, staff have reported being compelled to continue working, even if they have been identified as potential close contacts of infected patients.

Speaking anonymously, one doctor told the *Sydney Morning Herald*: “The centre is not safe for COVID-19 patients, mental health wards are not designed for infection control. We were only able to access PPE

[personal protective equipment] a week after the first patient tested positive.” According to state Health Minister Brad Hazzard, around a third of the staff are not vaccinated. In other words, they have been forced to work without any protection at all.

Amid some of the Nepean workers going into isolation, the nearby Katoomba mental health unit was closed on Tuesday, with staff given only hours to transfer mentally-ill patients. The Katoomba staff are being directed to cover staffing shortages at Nepean, with some speaking to the press about their fears of being infected.

Across the state, around 900 health workers are in some form of isolation, the vast majority in Sydney. This has prompted warnings that the NSW hospital system, which was already in crisis prior to the outbreak due to decades of underfunding, is in significant strain. Rates of COVID hospitalisations are at record levels, with 391 patients, 63 of them in intensive care, 30 of whom require ventilation to breathe. As the case numbers and consequent illness continue to rise, the emerging staff shortages could have catastrophic consequences.

Other sections of the working class are also on the frontlines. More than 560 transport workers in Sydney are isolating, the majority of them bus drivers, after two staff at the bus depot in the inner-west suburb of Leichhardt tested positive early this week. Despite interacting with the public on a daily basis, bus drivers are not on any priority vaccination list, meaning many are still not inoculated.

The official rejection of needed safety measures has included a refusal to ensure any containment of the virus in Sydney. This has led to a rapid spread over the past fortnight, to the Hunter and Newcastle regions several hours north of Sydney, to the north of NSW including Byron Bay, and to the Orana region of the state’s central and north-west.

Twenty-five new cases were reported in the Orana towns of Dubbo and Walgett today. The spread of the virus to the latter in particular, raises major dangers for the substantial indigenous population in the region, which comprises almost 30 percent of Walgett residents. As the most oppressed section of the working class, it is afflicted with far greater than average health issues.

Only around 14 percent of indigenous adults, however, have been vaccinated. Experts have warned that a major outbreak in central Australia, where there is also a large indigenous population, could result in fatality rates of five percent among unvaccinated indigenous people. In Walgett, local officials have stated that the town’s meagre

medical facilities would rapidly be overwhelmed if there were COVID hospitalisations.

Meanwhile, the virus is continuing to spread nationally, with Delta infections being recorded everyday in the Victorian state capital, Melbourne, which is Australia’s second-largest city. Yesterday, the Australian Capital Territory was sent into a snap lockdown, after infections were detected in Canberra, the seat of the national parliament, with the cluster now standing at seven cases.

Amid the worsening crisis, the focus of all of the governments is on pressing ahead with the “reopening” of the economy, in line with the homicidal policies being pursued by the ruling elites internationally.

An editorial in the *Australian Financial Review* (AFR) on Wednesday spelt out the agenda, hailing the NSW government for its plans to begin easing the already inadequate restrictions once the arbitrary figure of six million vaccine doses are administered in the state.

“In a challenge to the prevailing pandemic psychology, the delta variant is forcing the state to guide the nation away from its fixation with zero cases,” the AFR proclaimed. The NSW government was “moving toward using vaccinations, rather than lockdowns, to live with what would become a progressively less deadly virus, much like the flu, as Ms Berejiklian says.”

People, however, do not live with the virus. They become grievously-ill, face the risk of death and the potential of other life-changing consequences, including dramatic losses in cognitive function and long-COVID. The position of the capitalist class, in Australia, no less than their counterparts around the world, is that the health, safety and lives of working people must be sacrificed to ensure unimpeded corporate profit-making activities.

In opposition to this line, the Socialist Equality Party has called on workers to establish rank-and-file committees, in workplaces, schools, hospitals and in the community, to fight for the closure of non-essential production, to enforce safety measures elsewhere, and to coordinate resistance to the deadly policies of the governments.



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