

Sudden lockdown in Australia's most populous state as Sydney outbreak widens

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On Saturday afternoon, the New South Wales (NSW) Liberal-National Coalition government declared a snap seven-day lockdown across Australia's most populous state. Case numbers continue to soar in Sydney, the epicentre, with a growing number of infections recorded in regional areas outside the state capital, as well as in neighbouring Victoria and the Australian Capital Territory.

The announcement pointed to the extent of the COVID-19 crisis, on both the political and medical fronts. In a highly unusual move, the statewide measure was not even foreshadowed at the daily press briefing delivered by government officials that morning. Instead, the news came several hours later through the social media accounts of government ministers and NSW health authorities.

Only two days earlier, on Thursday, NSW Health Minister Brad Hazzard had rejected calls for a state-wide lockdown, declaring that he did not "see any reason on the advice I've had to date why we would move further than [where] the problems are." Hazzard linked this to his government's resistance to lockdowns in general and its drive to "reopen the economy," stating: "There is a defining difference between NSW and other states—we have always tried to keep as much of NSW open as possible."

For almost two months, since infections of the highly contagious Delta strain were discovered in Sydney, the NSW government has rejected calls for adequate measures to prevent a catastrophe along the lines of what has occurred in India and Indonesia, and the resurgence in countries such as Britain and the US. It has introduced only piecemeal restrictions, with the harshest measures reserved for working-class communities in western and southwestern Sydney. The majority of workplaces, aside from offices, have remained open, despite being the drivers of transmission.

The abrupt turnaround on a statewide lockdown came amid the highest infection numbers in Sydney and the widest transmission elsewhere in the state since the pandemic began. NSW had a record 466 cases, announced on Saturday morning, followed by 415 on Sunday and a new high of 478 this morning.

Of the 1,359 infections in three days, the vast majority have been reported as unlinked, so the authorities do not know the

source of transmission, and as being among people who were active in the community while potentially infectious. Both are considered metrics of the extent of transmission, including infections that are not being detected, and of the likelihood of further increases of case numbers.

Of today's new infections, for instance, the transmission source of 337 is described as "being under investigation," while 381 may have been in the community for all or part of their contagious period.

The state government is clearly aware that the rise in infections, which leading epidemiologists have said represents a slow exponential growth, is threatening a collapse of the hospital system. Eight deaths were announced in Sydney today, including a man in his 40s, and a 15-year-old boy, who reportedly succumbed to pneumococcal meningitis while also COVID-19 positive. The fatalities take the death toll since the outbreak began to 56.

There are now a record 391 COVID-19 patients in NSW hospitals, most in Sydney. Some 66 are in intensive care, with 28 of those people requiring ventilation to continue breathing. An estimated 1,000 to 1,200 hospital staff are in isolation, after having been potentially exposed to COVID-19.

The chronically underfunded hospital system was already under intense pressure prior to the outbreak, so the widespread staff shortages call into question the ability of some facilities, especially in western and southwestern Sydney and rural areas, to cope with demand. Already, intensive care COVID-19 patients are being transferred from Sydney hospitals to Wollongong Hospital, about 85 kilometres south of the capital.

The government's resistance to effective measures has resulted in a rapid spread of the virus throughout the state. Over the past fortnight, dozens of cases have been recorded in the Hunter and Newcastle regions several hours north of Sydney, exposure sites have been registered in the state's northeast, and there are growing infection numbers in the northwest.

The latter transmission is especially dangerous, as it is occurring in towns such as Dubbo and Walgett, which have large indigenous populations that are extremely vulnerable to COVID-19, because of a host of health issues stemming from decades of oppression. Some 35 of today's infections were in the local health district that covers those two towns. There are

already reports of cases among Aboriginal people. The northwestern areas have some of the lowest vaccination rates and limited healthcare systems, which would rapidly be overwhelmed by COVID-19 hospitalisations.

The government's motivation in calling the snap lockdown is to forestall an intensification of the crisis that would jeopardise the hospital system, further inflame widespread anger among workers and young people and threaten its political survival. The aim is also to create the conditions for a long-planned lifting of restrictions, in line with the demands of the corporate and financial elite for an end to all lockdowns.

NSW Premier Gladys Berejiklian has repeatedly foreshadowed an easing of restrictions, as early as the end of this month. This would be based upon the arbitrary figure of six million vaccine doses being administered in the state, fewer than enough to ensure that even half the adult population had one dose. Children, who account for hundreds of infections every fortnight, would not be inoculated.

The NSW plan is a variant of the national model, adopted by all the state and territory administrations, most of them Labor Party-led, and the federal Coalition government. The "roadmap" calls for an effective end to lockdowns once 70 percent of adults are fully inoculated, even though the modelling acknowledges that this would result in hundreds of thousands of infections and tens of thousands of deaths.

Over the past several days, Berejiklian has restated her opposition to any strategy aimed at the elimination of COVID-19 transmission. This morning, she again stated that any perspective of reducing cases to zero was "unrealistic," and insisted that the population would need to "live" with the deadly virus. Prime Minister Scott Morrison has similarly restated that the policy of the governments, state and federal, Labor and Liberal-National alike, was never to achieve zero-COVID-19, but merely to suppress outbreaks where they occur. In practice, this means allowing the virus to circulate.

Berejiklian's strategy appears to be to try to lower case numbers over the coming fortnight and boost vaccination rates, which remain among the lowest of advanced capitalist countries, as quickly as possible, to justify a lifting of some restrictions. The methods that her government has selected, with the support of the state Labor Party opposition, are the blunt instruments of state repression.

A contingent of 300 Australian Defence Force personnel, primarily patrolling the working-class suburbs of western and southwestern Sydney, has been boosted to 800. Police have been given expanded powers, including to issue on-the-spot fines of up to \$5,000 for alleged breaches of restrictions.

Workplaces, however, which the government belatedly admitted have driven transmission, will remain open, and the measures stop far short of those epidemiologists say would be required to end the outbreak.

The ruling-class calculations underlying Berejiklian's policies, and those of the entire political establishment, were

spelled out in a comment today by the *Australian's* editor-at-large Paul Kelly. He again hailed the national reopening plan, and Berejiklian's policy, which was to "find a 'normal' life by vaccination—living with the virus, its cases and its deaths, restoring freedoms and economic life."

Kelly condemned Western Australian state Labor Premier Mark McGowan who has over recent days postured as a supporter of coronavirus elimination, even though he signed up to the national "roadmap," and has focused for the past 18 months on ensuring unfettered business operations. McGowan's comments reflect the political crisis facing governments as a result of widespread popular opposition to the ruling elite's program of "living with the virus."

Kelly said the "biggest threat" to the national reopening was "Berejiklian's inability to contain the Delta variant. If NSW still has hundreds of cases when it reaches the 70 percent vaccine threshold other premiers will simply refuse to open in unison with NSW. Any national reopening strategy will be fatally compromised. A chaotic situation will unfold."

To use Kelly's words, the aim is to create the political conditions for a national reopening in which "hospitalisation and deaths can be managed as the nation learns to live with the virus."

The biggest challenge to this agenda, which will result in mass death and illness, is the emerging resistance of workers, students and young people. The Socialist Equality Party has called for the formation of a network of workplace rank-and-file committees to fight for demands that protect the health and safety of working people, above the profit interests of the corporate and financial elite.



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