NSW state government proclaims “light at the end of the tunnel” amid Australia’s worst COVID outbreak

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In a bizarre press conference yesterday, New South Wales (NSW) Liberal-National Coalition Premier Gladys Berejiklian declared that she could see “light at the end of the tunnel,” even as the most populous state recorded its highest number of daily COVID infections since the beginning of the pandemic.

Thursday’s tally of 681 infections followed Wednesday’s total of 633 cases, the first time the state had exceeded 500. Another 644 infections were announced this morning. Each day, the vast majority of cases are unlinked, meaning that authorities do not know the source of transmission, and to what extent they were potentially infectious in the community, signalling a further spread and foreshadowing an even greater increase in the numbers.

The daily infections have tended to double every 11 to 14 days since the outbreak began on June 16, a trend that is continuing. The R-Factor, which indicates how many other individuals each COVID-positive person is infecting sits at 1.39, so for every 10 people infected they are transmitting it to 14 others. A figure greater than 1 all but guarantees a continuing rise in infections.

Berejiklian’s visions of “light,” under conditions in which all metrics show that the crisis is deepening, can only be understood in the context of her government’s political strategy.

In line with the drive by the ruling elite for an end to all lockdown measures and for a full “reopening” of the economy, the state government has openly dispensed with any, even nominal, commitment to eradicating COVID transmission in Sydney. Instead, it is pitching increased vaccination as a means of “living with the virus,” even though all modelling and international experience demonstrates that this will result in a catastrophic rise in illness and death.

Speaking yesterday, Berejiklian presented the NSW government as the trailblazer, whose lead would have to be followed by state and territory governments across the country. “I appreciate what we are going through looks difficult but every state in Australia will need to come to terms with the fact that when you get to a certain level of vaccination and open up, Delta will creep in,” she said. “We can’t pretend that we will have zero cases around Australia with Delta.”

Berejiklian cited the national roadmap for “reopening,” adopted by all of Australia’s governments in July: “As the Doherty report says, once you get to 80 percent double dose and you have to open up, everyone will have to learn to live with Delta.” The only difference was that “in New South Wales, we are learning that earlier than others.”

The refusal of the government to institute the lockdown measures necessary to end transmission, including workplace closures and uniform, city-wide restrictions in Sydney, is provoking increasing opposition. Journalists, including from corporate outlets that have promoted the “reopening” drive, are increasingly asking Berejiklian critical questions, in a limited reflection of the popular sentiment.

Epidemiologists are denouncing the government in increasingly strident terms. Speaking on Channel Nine’s “Today Show” yesterday morning, Professor Brandan Crabb, the director of the Burnett Institute medical research organisation, stated that unless urgent action were taken, daily cases in NSW could reach 3,000 to 4,000 within 30 days.

“We’re in now what is a national emergency,” Crabb said. “We’re in a steam train that is heading towards a cliff, not heading towards a station which is where we should be going.” He warned that the “worse-case scenario is we have an Italy-style health catastrophe. That is actually the trajectory at the moment.”

Already, there are infection clusters at a number of Sydney hospitals, over 1,000 staff are in isolation after having been potentially exposed to COVID, and medical procedures, including mammograms and many elective surgeries, are being indefinitely postponed.

The greater the crisis the more vociferous the NSW government has become in blaming working people for the spread of COVID. Berejiklian and other senior government ministers have repeatedly asserted that all would be well, except for residents of the working-class suburbs of western and southwestern Sydney breaking the rules.

This assertion was refuted at yesterday’s press conference by NSW Health representative Marianne Gale, who admitted, in

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response to a journalist's question, that the "vast majority' of the new infections were not the result of infractions. Instead, they were the outcome of workers contracting the virus in their places of employment, and it then being spread in large households.

But while it refuses to implement broader workplace closures, because of the impact this would have on corporate profit, the Berejiklian government is stepping-up its police-state response.

This morning, the government announced that 12 Local Government Areas (LGAs) in the west and southwest, already under greater restrictions than any other part of Sydney, will also be subject to a curfew between 9 p.m. and 5 a.m. every night. The measure was instituted at the request of the NSW Police, and despite the state's Chief Medical Officer Dr Kerry Chant conceding that the evidence was "mixed" as to whether it would have any impact on transmission.

Residents of the LGAs will not be permitted to leave without a permit, most likely for authorised work. People entering the areas will also need written permission from the authorities. Under conditions where the boundaries between LGAs are arbitrary and often not well known, this is a recipe for punitive measures on a vast scale, with fines for violations as high as $5,000.

The announcement came a day after the *Sydney Morning Herald* revealed that NSW Police Commissioner Mick Fuller had delivered a video statement to officers, in which he gave them carte blanche to harass the working-class communities.

"I have said before, if you write a ticket, and you get it wrong, I understand, and I won't hold you to account for that," Fuller said. "We have to shape the behaviour of people to get out of lockdown, and I know all of us want to be out of lockdown by Christmas, so please take the challenge."

Even as the police-state measures are being expanded, health measures are being withdrawn. It was also announced today that workers in the 12 LGAs who travel elsewhere for broadly defined "critical work," will no longer be provided with surveillance testing for COVID every three days as previously.

What is emerging in Sydney is a tale of two cities, with more affluent areas subject to lighter restrictions, and the working-class suburbs flooded with the police and military-personnel and facing draconian limitations on personal movement.

Berejiklian continues to flag that from next month fully vaccinated people outside the 12 LGAs will have greater "freedoms," though as yet these are undefined. Today, the *Australian* published what it described as Berejiklian's "freedom plan."

Once adult vaccination reached 70 percent, fully-inoculated people would be able to visit restaurants, cafes and other public venues. It is possible that those in the 12 LGAs would be excluded. The model, set to begin in early October, would also see the full resumption of face-to-face teaching, even though thousands of children are being infected every month, and they are not eligible for a vaccine.

The NSW government's open implementation of the "live with the virus" policy is provoking consternation from other state and territory leaders. Andrew Barr, the Labor chief minister of the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) told the *Guardian* today that the NSW government was placing young people at risk by not tightening restrictions in Sydney.

"I just see young people being horribly exposed by the decision of another government and I don't know what I can do to protect my community against that," Barr said. He condemned Berejiklian, for having abandoned any perspective of eliminating COVID transmission in Sydney. "That decision has massive implications for the ACT, Victoria and Queensland, and then South Australia and the Northern Territory," he stated. "The only two jurisdictions that can conceivably protect themselves from NSW's decision to a certain degree are Western Australia and Tasmania."

Barr also warned against the increasing presentation of vaccine rates hitting 70 percent, or even less, as being the trigger for a "freedom day." This program, pursued by the British government, has seen cases skyrocket.

Barr and others are fearful of the political consequences of the escalating COVID crisis. They are well aware that the vast majority of working people are in favour of lockdown measures aimed at ensuring health and safety above profits.

With the majority of infections in all states under 30 years of age, and a significant proportion being children, all governments are acutely aware of mounting opposition to reopening face to face teaching and lifting lockdowns. Barr said: "My view is Australian parents will just not tolerate the country opening up with their kids being exposed, because that is where the virus is going to go."

But the Labor premiers and chief ministers are themselves responsible for what is unfolding in NSW and elsewhere. They formed a majority of the national cabinet, composed of all state, territory and federal leaders, which in July approved a plan for a "phased reopening" of the economy, even as the virus circulates.

If they are now recoiling at this program, it is because they are terrified that mass working-class opposition will take the form of major social and political struggles.

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