Australian governments proclaim need to “live with the virus” amid record infections

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The more Australia’s COVID crisis spirals out of control, with increasing infections, hospitalisations and deaths, the more vehemently are state and federal government leaders insisting that the population must “live with the virus” and its continuing spread.

This policy, identical to that being advanced by governments in Britain, the US and elsewhere, is a declaration that working people must accept death and illness on a mass scale in the interests of corporate profit.

Over the past three days, as daily Australian infections have approached 1,000 for the first time since the pandemic began, Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison and New South Wales (NSW) Premier Gladys Berejiklian have stepped up a campaign for the imminent lifting of safety restrictions and an end to lockdowns for all time.

Both have described a “roadmap” to “reopening” the country as an unbreakable “pact with the Australian people.” In reality, it was worked out behind closed doors, without any public discussion, and was adopted in July by the national cabinet, composed of the state and territory leaders, most of them from Labor, and the federal Liberal-National Coalition government, in meetings whose content remains secret.

According to the “roadmap,” lockdowns will become “highly unlikely” once 70 percent of the adult population is fully vaccinated. In phase three, triggered by an 80 percent rate, COVID will be treated like the flu in preparation for a “return to normal.” The modelling upon which the plan is based acknowledges that it will result in mass infections, as high as the hundreds of thousands, along with thousands of hospitalisations and deaths.

This was all known when the state and territory leaders signed off on the program.

As the current outbreak has worsened, however, some Labor premiers and chief ministers have made mealy-mouthed criticisms of the Berejiklian government, which has allowed the unchecked spread of Delta in Sydney, the country’s most populous city. They have warned that a full reopening, with case numbers rapidly increasing, could result in a health catastrophe.

The comments are motivated, above all, by fear of the growing opposition among working people to the subordination of their health to corporate profit interests.

In response, Morrison has given his most explicit statements outlining the federal government's homicidal “herd immunity” policy. In a press conference this morning, he declared that “our goal is to live with the virus, not to live in fear of it.” It was necessary for the population to “adjust its mindset,” and to recognise that infection numbers would “not be the issue once we get above 70 percent” vaccination.

Morrison warned against those who would “seek to undermine the national plan,” as well as those who “may fear it and have concerns.’ “Our goal must be to help people overcome these fears and not give in to them,” he said. They could not be allowed to obstruct the immediate lifting of lockdowns once the 70 percent target was reached.

These comments are nothing short of a declaration of war on all workers and youth seeking to protect their health and lives, from nurses and doctors, to factory workers, postal staff, teachers and students. Already, there is mass opposition to the criminally-negligent response to the Sydney outbreak, widely-reflected on social media.

Morrison and the other government leaders know that this will grow. The prime minister today said that infections would increase substantially, once the “roadmap” began to be implemented. He and federal Health Minister Greg Hunt chillingly stated that they had ensured intensive care capacity would be sufficient to cope with the surge in hospitalisations that would result.

Virtually identical statements have been made each day by Berejiklian and other representatives of the NSW state government. When NSW cases exceeded 800 on Saturday, the first time that benchmark had been reached by any Australian jurisdiction, Berejiklian said that of greater significance was the uptick in the rate of vaccination, because this was the path to “freedom.”

The government is predicting that vaccination targets for the lifting of the lockdown will be met in early October. It

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has dispensed with any pretence of seeking to curb transmission, much less end the present outbreak, which Berejiklian and other ministers now state is impossible.

In the space of the past three days, almost 2,500 infections have been reported, the vast majority in the working-class areas of western and south-west Sydney. The bulk of the cases are being reported each day as unlinked, meaning the authorities do not know the source of transmission, while most of the COVID-infected individuals have been in the community for all or part of their contagious period.

Outbreaks are also occurring in regional and rural areas, including in the western NSW town of Wilcannia, one of the poorest in the state, with a population that is primarily indigenous and at high-risk of succumbing to the disease.

The state is on track to exceed one thousand daily infections by the end of the month, while some epidemiologists have warned of cases reaching three to four thousand in September. On July 31, there had been 3,190 infections since the beginning of the outbreak on June 16. Less than a month later, the figure now stands at 13,022.

Under these conditions, the state government is foreshadowing the lifting of some of the inadequate restrictions next month, based on the arbitrary figure of six million vaccine doses having been administered. This would be followed by the beginning of stage two of the "roadmap" in October, including a possible full resumption of face-to-face teaching when term four begins.

Year 12 students outside of 12 local government areas in the west and south-west of Sydney are already permitted to attend school for two hours per day, four days a week, in preparation for a broader reopening.

As has been the case internationally, a complete resumption of in-person teaching threatens a health catastrophe. Over the weekend alone, 204 children under the age of nine contracted the virus in NSW, along with 276 aged between ten and nineteen. Throughout the outbreak, children and teenagers have accounted for at least a third of all cases. There is not yet an approved vaccination for children, meaning they would be completely unprotected in the event of a return to classroom learning.

Berejikian has blithely dismissed the dangers. This morning, she was asked by a journalist if her government had factored the situation in Israel into its reopening plans. There, almost 80 percent of the population is inoculated, but a reopening has resulted in a surge of infections, which stand above 6,000 per day in a country whose population size is comparable to NSW. Hospitalisations are also rising. The premier brushed the question aside, and later insisted that there was no ceiling of infection numbers that would overwhelm the state's health system.

Hospitalisations are already increasing rapidly. At the end of July, there were 203 COVID patients in NSW hospitals, 53 in intensive care. The number has grown to 586 COVID-19 cases admitted to hospital, with 100 people in intensive care, 32 of them requiring ventilation. All of Sydney's major hospitals are reporting intense strains on capacity, with over a thousand staff in the city isolating at any given time due to potential COVID exposure.

A health worker at Westmead Hospital, one of the largest in the country, informed the WSWS that as of today, the facility has 166 COVID patients, accounting for 17 percent of available bed space. The hospital is treating 41 pregnant women, eight of them as inpatients, who are COVID-positive.

As case numbers continue to rise, this is what the ruling elite has in store for millions of workers and young people. That is why the police and the military are being brought to the centre stage. A major state mobilisation is underway against residents of the working-class suburbs of western and south-western Sydney where conditions increasingly resemble martial law.

Anti-lockdown rallies were met with a massive show of police force over the weekend, including a complete shutdown of the central business district. The target of this operation was not the handful of right-wing agitators spouting similar talking points to Berejiklian and Morrison. Rather, the events were seized upon as a dry-run for a police confrontation with a movement of the working-class.

The situation on every front underscores the crucial importance of the formation of rank-and-file safety committees in all workplaces and communities, to fight for a program that prioritises public health over the profit interests of the banks and big business.

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