

Australian governments planning to end lockdowns amid the country's worst COVID outbreak

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The state governments in New South Wales (NSW) and Victoria are rapidly lifting safety restrictions as they prepare to end lockdowns next month. Each day, announcements of mass infections and hospitalisations, and a growing number of deaths, are accompanied by declarations that it is necessary to “reopen the economy.”

Underscoring the bipartisan character of this profit-driven campaign, the drive to end lockdowns is being spearheaded by Victoria's Labor Premier Daniel Andrews and Gladys Berejiklian, the head of the Liberal-National Coalition government in NSW.

They are implementing a plan that was signed off by the “National Cabinet,” comprised of the state and territory leaders, most of them Labor, and the federal Coalition government. It insists that the population must learn to “live with the virus,” in line with the deadly herd immunity program that has resulted in healthcare catastrophes around the world.

This morning, Berejiklian announced that the lockdown of Sydney will end next month, the Monday after 70 percent of the adult population is fully-vaccinated. This inoculation rate, which triggers the start of reopenings under the national plan, may be reached in the middle of October. Berejiklian vowed that mass face-to-face teaching in the schools would begin resuming from October 25, so the lockdown will be lifted before then.

The announcement was made as NSW reported another 1,405 daily infections. While the growth in case numbers has slowed over the past week, the state is recording between 1,200 and 1,500 infections per day.

Already, the NSW healthcare system is on the brink of a collapse, with nurses and doctors warning publicly that staffing levels are inadequate for the 1,175 COVID-19 cases admitted to hospitals, 202 people of them in intensive care, 80 requiring ventilation. At least 1,700

more are supposedly receiving “hospital grade care” in their homes.

The criminal character of the reopening plan is underscored by the fact that the lifting of the lockdown coincides exactly with what the NSW government itself predicts will be the sharpest crisis of the hospitals. Modelling it released earlier this week predicts that the state's intensive care units (ICUs) will enter into a “code black” in late October, signifying that they are “overwhelmed” and that “demand for critical care services significantly exceeds organisation-wide capacity.” ICU patients would exceed existing beds by almost 100.

The modelling states that the government will respond by activating a triage system, under which medical care will be allocated based on the likelihood of survival, meaning some critically-ill patients may be left to die. Staff-to-patient ratios, already at dangerous levels, will be further increased.

The dire predictions in the official modelling understate the extent of the crisis. It is based on cherry-picked and misleading data, and asserts that ICUs have a surge capacity of 700 beds additional to those already open, despite the fact that there are no extra nurses or doctors to staff them.

The reopening, which will inevitably result in a major spike in infections, can only exacerbate the disaster in the hospitals. This was indicated by a report in the *Australian* today that senior figures in NSW Health, including the state's Chief Health Officer Dr Kerry Chant, had called for a vaccination rate of between 80 and 85 percent before the lockdown was ended.

Chant reportedly “pointed to the experiences of Israel and the United Kingdom as examples of how communities could still suffer if reopening occurred

without adequate vaccination coverage and restrictions in place, resulting in high case numbers, hospitalisations and other adverse effects on health systems.”

The health officer, however, was “overruled” by Berejiklian. The plan to end the lockdown is labelled the “roadmap for freedom,” aping British Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s description of July 19, when his government lifted all restrictions as “freedom day.” Johnson has since declared that 50,000 annual COVID fatalities are “acceptable.” Berejiklian has said the population must “put things in perspective” and recognise that “you are going to have death.”

A NSW government press release today said the “roadmap” was designed by the government and industry, i.e., the major corporations. Treasurer Dominic Perrottet, who was reportedly agitating in cabinet for an immediate end to inadequate safety restrictions during the early stages of the outbreak in July, told the press conference that the “roadmap” is aimed at providing “certainty to business.”

While everything is being done to ensure a full resumption of corporate profit-making activities, millions of workers and children are being placed at great risk. The lockdown will be ended the Monday after the 70 percent target is reached, even though it takes up to three weeks after inoculation for immunity to be developed.

The 70 percent figure, moreover, accounts for only around 56 percent of the population. Vaccines were approved for 12–16-year-olds earlier this month, but Berejiklian insisted today that inoculation rates among this cohort were not counted in the 70 percent target. There is no vaccine available for children under 12. A third of all infections in the current outbreak have been among children and teenagers.

Under these conditions, hundreds of thousands are to be herded into the classrooms in a school reopening that begins on October 5 and will see every year level return by November 8. There will not even be a mask mandate for students under 12. This threatens a similar scenario to that playing out in the US, where each week teachers are dying and hospital paediatric units are overflowing with children infected by COVID.

The end of the lockdown will see the reopening of hospitality venues, including pubs, restaurants and cafes, with patronage restricted to those who are fully-vaccinated and density supposedly limited to one person per four square metres. The same rules will apply for all retail, as well as hairdressers and nail salons, while gyms can have as many as 20 customers present at any one

time.

Stadiums and other mass outdoor events can proceed with up to 5,000 spectators. Cinemas, theatres, music halls, museums and galleries will open with up to 75 percent capacity. Home gatherings of up to five vaccinated adults will be permitted, along with outdoor gatherings of 20. Weddings and funerals can be held with 50 attendees and religious services can resume. Travel will be permitted throughout NSW and camping grounds will reopen.

Taken together, the measures signal open slather, abandoning any pretence of seeking to limit the spread of the virus. Already, the government announced today an end to lockdown measures in regional areas of the state that have not recorded COVID cases for the past 14 days, even if the virus has been detected in sewage systems.

The same program is being pursued in Victoria, where Premier Andrews has abandoned earlier claims that his government is attempting to end transmission in the current outbreak. A lockdown ends for all of regional Victoria, except the city of Shepparton, at midnight tonight, despite multiple exposure sites throughout the state. The same preparations for a “reopening” based on arbitrary vaccination figures are being drawn up, as Melbourne’s infection numbers grow rapidly, reaching a new high of 324 cases today.

Modelling cited by the *Age* this week predicts a ten-fold rise in total cases, to 18,000 by October 16. This would be accompanied by some 800 hospitalisations, with warnings that Victoria’s healthcare system, which has even less ICU capacity than NSW, could be overwhelmed.

Workers and young people are being brought face to face with the deadly logic of the capitalist market. Everything, including the health and lives of the population, is subordinated to the profit interests of the largest corporations and banks. The preparations for a dangerous reopening must be fought, including through the formation of rank-and-file workplace committees, and a political struggle against Labor, the Liberals and the entire establishment, based on a socialist program to eradicate the virus and ensure life.



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