

Workers in Shepparton, Australian regional town beset by COVID, speak out

Our reporters
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Over the past month, the city of Shepparton has been on the frontlines of a major COVID outbreak in the state of Victoria. At its height, the surge of the Delta variant effectively paralysed the regional centre, which is located 190 kilometres north of Melbourne, infecting more than one hundred residents and forcing another 20,000, a third of the population, into isolation.

While many of those compelled to quarantine were released from the stay and home order on September 2, there are still at least 78 active infections in the city.

At least seven schools became exposure sites, including several primary schools and two campuses at Greater Shepparton Secondary College (GSSC), meaning that many families with children were hit with the isolation order. Goulburn Valley Health was impacted, with up to 530 staff being furloughed, and the town's supermarkets also faced major staffing shortfalls.

While Victorian Labor Premier Daniel Andrews and other government representatives have made mealy-mouthed statements, "thanking" residents for "pulling together," the official response has been grossly inadequate. The state's emergency management deputy commissioner was deployed to the city, along with 80 army personnel. The prominence of the military reflects the gutting of health and welfare services and is part of a broader authoritarian push to normalise the involvement of the army in daily civilian life.

Several townspeople spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* about the difficulties their families have faced earlier this month.

Colleen is a grandparent in Shepparton where a number of local schools were amalgamated, to create the GSSC "super school."

"The food problem is probably the worst," Colleen said. "The community does work well together here. There has been some really lovely stuff happening here. We do pull together and support each other.

"I don't think people mind giving up a few weeks of their lives to get rid of the virus, but to have to stay home with kids and practically no food is pretty hard. My daughter has three teenagers, so they're big eaters. They're coping, but only just."

She explained the situation when testing stations were overwhelmed early in the Shepparton outbreak: "They were saying don't come unless you're in this particular group. My granddaughter had symptoms and wasn't allowed to go and get tested right at the beginning. Luckily, she tested negative, but she was in a tutoring room with somebody who had COVID for over an hour. Most of the people in that room had gone down with it."

As infection sources spiralled, the town rapidly ground to a halt. "Most of the public-school kids go after school to work, for pocket money. A lot of the GSSC kids do that. At McDonalds they have a messenger app where the kids can text and say, 'I can't work tomorrow night, can someone else take my place?' and the bosses can talk to them about their shifts.

"And every single worker wrote in on the same day, at the same time, to say I'm in isolation, I can't work for a fortnight.' They had nobody. They were freaking out. If one family member is in isolation, the whole family must go into isolation. It is a huge impact on a community like this, especially with the combined travel and working."

Colleen is particularly worried about the implications for her grandchildren: "I'm sure that they will insist on them going back, whether they've had vaccinations or not. And that concerns me greatly. Frankly if it was my children, I wouldn't be sending them to school. I'd be keeping them home and home-schooling them.

"One of the things that worries me is the students all being crowded in together, when it becomes one school, which will be dangerous with the pandemic.

"I know my kids are terrified for their kids. We've been watching all the stuff from America, and what is

happening to their children over there. And that poor little 13-year-old, who died within four days of getting it from going back to school.

“I would love to see the whole of Shepparton’s parents stand up and say ‘No we’re not going back till they’re all vaccinated, and until that happens, our kids won’t be going back to school. Teachers and children must be inoculated, and we’ll keep them home till then.’”

Shepparton is a large multicultural community, with the biggest indigenous population of any Victorian town and a sizeable refugee community.

Colleen commented that the town is a working-class community: “There is a definite divide in Shepparton. There is the elite and then there is the rest of us. Most people are just hard working. We have a good percentage of the population who are low income. A huge amount of people are low income, but working hard for their children and themselves. They are working-class people who do everything they can for their kids and want the best education and the best protection for them they can get. They’ve been neglected. They’re the ones whose children’s education has been brought right down to the base minimum.”

Abid is originally from Uruzgan Province in Afghanistan, which he left in 2003. He lives in Shepparton and works on an orchard, picking and pruning. His son attends the McGuire campus of GSSC.

“We’re at home quarantining for 14 days because my son goes to McGuire,” Abid explained. “The day after quarantine started my wife gave birth to our new baby. We went to hospital and I could only stay there for two hours and I had to leave my wife alone to have the baby. Friends have been delivering food and someone from Melbourne brought food yesterday.”

Abid is relying on Centrelink welfare payments for income. “My English isn’t great so we don’t understand what’s happening with COVID,” he said. “There is so much confusion on social media we don’t know what to think.”

Shepparton’s major industry is the SPC fruit cannery. James, who is a permanent worker there, said: “We’re still working three shifts even though 100 SPC workers are in quarantine. At the moment we’re working on baked beans, spaghetti and canning fruit from storage, as it’s the dormant season for fruit trees.

“I had my first vaccination last week at the showgrounds. SPC have made it compulsory to get vaccinated by January 1 next year. They said they did a survey and only four percent opposed getting vaccinated,

but we didn’t get surveyed. There are three guys in my area who aren’t going to have it. The union is backing people who don’t want to get vaccinated.”

Melissa, a single mother with five children, is a self-employed photographer. During lockdowns, she has had five wedding jobs cancelled this year. “That’s a few thousand each job. I sat there and cried. I’ve received no extra assistance from the government.”

She has been in quarantine after visiting an exposure site. “I needed medical assistance as my children needed prescription medicines, but doctor’s appointments weren’t available as they were quarantining. My son’s schoolteacher’s friends helped me. Food supplies were days in arriving.

“I have a friend who is a single mum who has been living on cereals all week, in the end just having it with water. A lot of single parents don’t store food and those that do have large families and it runs out quickly. A friend went grocery shopping for me, but out of a list of 15 items I needed, only two were available. There’s no one to stock the shelves and the delivery drivers are quarantined.”

Melissa strongly supported lockdowns. “I agree with lockdowns. We’ve been in lockdowns for too long to give up. If we have put all this work in, why give up on it? In New South Wales, by allowing it to continue, they’ve overloaded the health system. It’s a shock to think that what they’re doing there will bleed into the other states. In a town like Shepparton our health system crashed.”

She was very alarmed by the situation in the United States.

“We could eradicate COVID or we’ll have a country that will be sick for a long time. The longer we can postpone widespread exposure, the longer scientists will have to deal with it. I have friends in the US. One who is 36-years-old and very fit and healthy, was on a ventilator for nine weeks. A photographer friend told me the reason they had to keep working was because the only benefit they would get was \$146 per month!”



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