

Australian epidemiologists warn reopening will lead to mass deaths

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A newly-established group of prominent epidemiologists and scientists has challenged the New South Wales (NSW) Liberal-National Coalition government's claims that lifting stay-at-home measures next month, amid the country's worst COVID outbreak, will lead to "freedom" and a return to "normality."

Instead they warn that such a pro-business "reopening" will result in mass infections, deaths and a breakdown of the hospital system.

The formation of the organisation, named OzSAGE, expresses the growing concern of principled medical experts, along with tens of thousands of health workers, over the catastrophic consequences of a ruling-class drive to dispense with safety restrictions and to force the population to "live with the virus" in the interests of corporate profit.

The NSW state government, with the support of the Labor Party and the other governments across the country, has been at the forefront of this drive. Last week, NSW Premier Gladys Berejiklian unveiled a "roadmap" to end lockdown measures, even as the state records well over 1,000 infections each day. The NSW program is based on a bipartisan "National Cabinet" plan, under which restrictions will be lifted once 70 to 80 percent of adults are fully vaccinated.

To justify its reopening, the NSW government released modelling last week. Based on cherry-picked and misleading data, it purported to show that while the state's hospitals would be stretched, they could cope with an anticipated surge in serious COVID illness.

Even that modelling predicted that the state's hospitals will enter a "code black" in late October, signifying that intensive care units will be "overwhelmed." It indicated the probable need for a "triage" system, by which some critically-ill patients could be denied care, accompanied by a dangerous reduction in nurse-to-patient ratios.

But the official modelling predicted that the "code

black" will be short, and managed through mythical additional resources, even though there are no extra health workers to staff them. The modelling was premised on the existing restrictions remaining in place. It therefore anticipated a sharp fall in infections, right as the lockdown measures are ended.

The OzSAGE group's own modelling takes into account the reopening plan. It includes six different scenarios.

If the government lifts restrictions at 70 percent adult vaccination, and implements a full reopening at 80 percent, as it has stated, there will be 1,169 deaths by February 1, including 186 people who have already lost their lives in the current outbreak.

The state's contact-tracing is in a shambles and is being wound back. Even if it were enhanced over the coming months, OzSAGE predicts 866 fatalities.

The prospects for the hospital system are dire. Without enhanced tracing, COVID hospitalisations would peak at 6,340 in December. There would be 1,192 ICU patients, 892 with COVID, well above the existing number of staffed beds. This would trigger a five-week "code black" from December 9 to January 5.

The OzSAGE modelling is far more credible than the Doherty Report, a pseudo-scientific document commissioned by the "National Cabinet" to legitimise its reopening "roadmap."

Among its false premises, the Doherty document is premised on lifting restrictions in conditions where there are 30 COVID cases across the country. There are currently more than 38,000 active infections. The OzSAGE modelling is based on there being 1,890 daily cases in NSW when restrictions are lifted next month, in line with current infection trends.

The OzSAGE group includes highly-respected experts, such as University of Melbourne Professor Tony Blakely, Burnet Institute head Brendan Crabb, Grattan Institute

health economist Stephen Duckett, Kirby Institute biosecurity program head Raina MacIntyre and Australian National University vice-chancellor and Nobel-prize winning astronomer Brian Schmidt.

Unlike numbers of government-aligned chief medical officers and commentators, OzSAGE does not seek to downplay the dangers of the virus. The group notes that the target of 70 percent adult vaccination represents just “56 percent of the whole population fully vaccinated, and is not enough to control the Delta variant.”

In contrast to the corporate publications pushing for an end to lockdowns, the OzSAGE experts refer to the international experience.

They note: “Israel, the UK, and the United States all lifted restrictions between May and June, after Delta arrived, when total population vaccination rates were about the same as the NSW targets. This resulted in a resurgence in all three countries of high and significant rates of infection with heavy strain on health care and hospitals, even though all of these countries also had much higher levels of immunity due to natural infection and vaccination than in Australia.”

The group emphasises the importance of the precautionary principle, given that much remains unknown about COVID, including its potentially dire long-term health effects and the likelihood of further mutations. They warn against comparisons of COVID to influenza, as have been made by a host of government leaders, instead stating that a more appropriate analogy would be to deadly infectious diseases such as the measles and polio.

On this basis, they advocate a strategy for the elimination of the coronavirus to prevent sustained, mass outbreaks of the disease, based on vaccine-immunity and public health measures. The experts contrast this approach with eradication—the removal of the virus from the entire globe—deeming that unlikely.

Eradication, the WSWS and leading scientists have explained, is both possible and necessary, but raises crucial political issues. Chief among them is the need for an international movement of the working class against the homicidal policies of capitalist governments, and for a globally coordinated, science-based response that prioritises health above big business interests.

The stand taken by the scientists itself points to the widespread opposition to the ruling class drive to force the population to accept mass infection and death. This is backed by the international experience in countries such as China and New Zealand, which have repeatedly

eliminated COVID through stringent public health measures.

The central role of workplaces in driving the spread of the virus is becoming ever clearer. According to the *Sydney Morning Herald*, the United Workers Union (UWU) has revealed that at least 150 food logistics and distribution workers have been infected during the current NSW outbreak, at 98 separate facilities. More than 3,000 others have been forced into isolation at some point, after being potentially exposed to the virus.

The UWU, together with the governments, has done everything to ensure a continuation of production. That is in line with the role of the trade unions as an industrial police force of the corporations.

Meanwhile, over 100 NSW childcare and early learning centres are being closed each week, after possible virus exposures. These facilities are running at substantial capacity so that parents can stay on the job.

In the neighbouring state of Victoria, construction sites and workplaces are emerging as centres of transmission. A third of the 450 new infections reported on Saturday were linked to construction, while up to 13 percent of all cases since the start of the outbreak stem from the sector.

The Victorian Labor government and the unions have kept the industry open during a lockdown of Melbourne, despite the vast majority of construction being non-essential. At the same time, the government is preparing to release its own “roadmap” for lifting restrictions, having dispensed with any pretence of seeking to eliminate transmission earlier this month.

The fight against the virus requires the formation of rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions, to combat the reopening drive, shutdown non-essential production and enforce safety measures.



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