

Australian governments pressing ahead in homicidal reopening drive with hospitals in crisis

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Australia's state and federal governments are pressing ahead with plans to end lockdown measures and lift safety restrictions next month, under conditions of daily mass infections, rapidly growing deaths and urgent warnings from health workers that the hospitals are already in an unprecedented crisis.

The governments of the two states at the centre of the current outbreak, New South Wales (NSW) and Victoria, are also at the forefront of this profit-driven campaign to "reopen the economy" and force the population to "live with the virus."

Yesterday, Victoria's Labor Premier Daniel Andrews announced a limited easing of lockdown measures, to come into effect at midnight on Friday once 70 percent of the state's adult population has received a single vaccine dose. People may meet outdoors with one other person, who is not from their household. Fully-vaccinated adults will be permitted to gather in groups of five, along with their children and dependents.

The changes, minor in themselves, are notable because they are intended to send a political message. Andrews is following an almost identical playbook to that rolled out in NSW by the Liberal-National Coalition government of Premier Gladys Berejiklian. In that state, the resumption of small outdoor gatherings was announced late last month, based on the same arbitrary measure of 70 percent single dose vaccination.

At the time, Andrews made snide remarks about "picnics" being allowed in NSW as case numbers soared above 1,000 for the first time since the pandemic began. Now, he has implemented the same policy. As in NSW, it coincides with the rapid expansion of the pandemic crisis in Victoria. Yesterday's announcement came as daily cases in the state exceeded 500 for the first time in the current outbreak.

Like Berejiklian, Andrews emphasised that the limited easing of rules was in preparation for greater "freedoms," regardless of the spread of the virus. "[W]e'll continue to

ramp up and do everything we can to keep this momentum going, so we can have Victoria open and thriving again as soon as possible," he declared.

Andrews has committed to releasing a "roadmap" for the lifting of restrictions this Sunday. As with the plan released by the NSW government earlier this month, it will be based upon the lifting of lockdown and safety restrictions once adult vaccinations reach 70 and 80 percent, levels that are guaranteed to result in a drastic increase in infections and hospitalisations.

The various state "roadmaps" are based on a national plan, adopted by all of the state, territory and federal leaders. It explicitly rejects any attempt to eliminate transmission of the deadly virus, insisting that COVID must be allowed to circulate indefinitely, as restrictions are ended, mass gatherings resumed, the schools fully reopened and all workers are herded back on the job.

The class character of this program is underscored by the demographics of the current outbreak, which are similar in both Victoria and NSW. The vast bulk of infections in Victoria are concentrated in the working-class northern and western suburbs of Melbourne, including more than 90 percent of the 510 new cases announced today. The western and southwestern areas of Sydney have likewise been the epicentre in NSW.

The trends underscore the central role of workplaces in transmission. In Victoria, it has been revealed that as many as 13 percent of all cases are linked to the construction industry, including a third of the total last Saturday. As in NSW, the sector has been permitted to continue operations, despite the non-essential character of its operations, because of the central role of property development and speculation to big-business profits.

An estimated one-third of infections throughout the NSW outbreak have been among children and teenagers. Roughly nine-tenths of infections in Victoria are among those aged under 50, including hundreds of children.

Meanwhile, the virus is continuing to circulate in regional areas of both states, threatening an even greater crisis. Having lifted lockdown measures outside of Melbourne last week, Andrews was compelled to reimpose them for the regional city of Ballarat, after cases were detected there. The lifting of safety measures in the NSW regions has been followed by new outbreaks in the town of Yass and the city of Lismore, while infections continue to be recorded in the state's west.

The planned reopening will only intensify these trends, with children, workers and the vulnerable most at risk.

The NSW government took a further step in the direction of ending restrictions, announcing this morning that it was beginning a trial of home quarantines for international arrivals. This is aimed at phasing out the existing regime, under which returnees and visitors isolate for fourteen days in private hotels. Instead, they would be allowed straight into the community, and would complete their quarantine in seven days, half the maximum incubation period of the virus.

The trial is being conducted in partnership with Qantas, Australia's largest airline, which has been at the forefront of the drive for an end to lockdowns and a resumption of mass international and domestic travel. Preparations for the opening of borders are being discussed in the national cabinet today, with mass international travel slated to begin as soon as the latter months of this year.

A perfect storm is being created, with the end of restrictions scheduled to coincide with the greatest crisis of the hospital system yet. In NSW, the lifting of the lockdown, scheduled for mid-next month, will occur as the government's own cherry-picked modelling indicates that the state's hospitals will enter into a "code black," signifying that demand for intensive care unit (ICU) beds outstrips available ICU beds.

Experts have warned the situation will be far worse than the official predictions, which are aimed at justifying the reopening drive. This week, OzSAGE, a group of epidemiologists, issued its own modelling, which warns that the code black may extend for five weeks over December and January, with the outbreak claiming 1,169 lives by February 1.

NSW hospitals are already in a major crisis as they treat 1,245 COVID patients, 228 in intensive care, 112 of whom require ventilation.

A western Sydney health worker told the WSWS that yesterday Liverpool Hospital, one of the city's largest, stopped accepting COVID admissions, because of insufficient resources. Patients had to be diverted to Wollongong Hospital, roughly an hour-and-a-half from Sydney. The flow-on effect is fewer paramedics and

ambulances in Sydney, both for primary admissions and inter-hospital transfers throughout the network.

Alarming, the worker also stated that Westmead hospital's vacuum insulated evaporator system, which supplies oxygen throughout the facility, is almost at capacity.

In comments to the *Guardian*, Anthony Byrne, a thoracic and respiratory physician at St Vincent's hospital, explained that staff from other wards were increasingly being used to treat COVID-19 patients.

"I mean you train for years to specialise and you might just do stents and coronary arteries, or even within respiratory medicine you might just do asthma, and then all of a sudden, we need your help over on Covid," Byrne said. "We now have neurologists looking after Covid patients, and cardiologists. Of course, we all do general medical training to be a physician so that's OK, but a lot of people haven't done other medicine than their specialty for many years."

He gave the example of a lung cancer patient, who required a procedure to confirm diagnosis. Because of the pressure on the entire hospital system, it was difficult to schedule an operating theatre and to find the staff required to carry out the operation.

In a blunt warning of what is being prepared, national Australian Medical Association President Dr. Omar Khorshid told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, "You probably don't want to have a heart attack or be diagnosed with cancer in October in NSW, and really we need to do everything we can to avoid our hospitals suffering from opening up too early."

The COVID death toll is beginning to rise rapidly. NSW recorded 12 fatalities yesterday, and again today, an equal record high. Those who perished today included two women aged in their 20s. In Victoria, a man in his 20s was among those whose deaths were reported yesterday. The state's hospital system has even less capacity than NSW. In NSW, Victoria and the Australian Capital Territory, there are currently more than 2,000 health workers isolating due to potential COVID exposure, intensifying a decades-long staffing shortage, and compelling some nurses to work 16-hour shifts.



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