

Victoria's COVID surge a warning of what is to come as Australian governments "reopen" the economy

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The state of Victoria yesterday recorded its largest single day of infections since the pandemic began and the biggest spike in case numbers of any jurisdiction in the country since the start of the coronavirus crisis. The tally reported on Thursday of 1,438 cases was 50 percent higher than the 950 infections the day before.

The massive growth in cases demonstrates that the virus is spreading out of control in Australia's second most-populous state, and especially its capital Melbourne. Throughout most of the current outbreak, infections have been concentrated in the city's northern and western working-class suburbs. Now, however, there are hundreds of exposure sites and cases in every area of Melbourne.

Announcing the record infections, Victoria's Labor Premier Daniel Andrews turned to a strategy most identified with New South Wales Liberal-National leader Gladys Berejiklian: blame the population for the crisis.

All would be well, Andrews suggested, but for hundreds of citizens who had supposedly broken COVID restrictions by participating in gatherings over the weekend. This assertion, not substantiated with any evidence, served to obscure the fact that the circulation of the virus, especially in working-class areas, has been the result of the government's refusal to institute workplace shutdowns during its wholly inadequate lockdown.

The claim is also dubious from the standpoint of basic arithmetic. Andrews said that as many as a third of the new cases were the result of gatherings for the Australian Football League (AFL) grand final. That event was on Saturday night. The cases announced yesterday were recorded in the 24 hours to 8 p.m. on Wednesday.

If the government theory is correct, the infected people developed symptoms, went to be tested, were provided with their results and interviewed by contact-tracers in four days or less, one of them being a Sunday. This would be a turnaround on all fronts faster than at virtually any other time during the pandemic.

Notably, the government said nothing about the possible contribution of anti-lockdown protests last week to the growth

of infections. Those illegal gatherings, led by extreme-right groups, involved several thousand people, most of them maskless. A small layer of construction workers participated in the events, including one protesting outside the Construction, Forestry, Maritime, Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) office in Melbourne. At least four CFMEU staff members have since tested positive and many more have been forced into isolation.

The government condemned the protests last week, but has quickly moved on. The reason for this is that the anti-lockdown demands of the demonstrators dovetail entirely with the program of the Victorian administration and all of its counterparts at the state and federal levels.

The governments in Victoria and NSW are preparing to "reopen the economy" beginning next month, based on arbitrary adult vaccination targets of 70 percent for the lifting of lockdowns and 80 percent for the removal of most other safety measures. Experiences in countries such as Israel and Singapore, both of which are confronting major surges of the virus after implementing a similar program, demonstrate that this will result in a major increase in illness and death.

In that sense, to the extent that unlawful gatherings contributed to the massive surge in cases, they merely demonstrate what will happen when such events are government-sanctioned and allowed to take place on a much larger scale.

Andrews, however, insisted that despite the jump in infections, a "roadmap" for "reopening" that he outlined in September would proceed. "We aren't turning back," Andrews said on Thursday. "We are finding a way to push through and get this place open, we've got to do it. This is a plan to open up."

Today, he announced expanded vaccine mandates, covering all "authorised workers," those who are permitted to go to their places of employment during the lockdown. The mass inoculation is necessary, and has the support of the overwhelming majority of the population. But Andrews and other government leaders are invoking vaccination as justification for dispensing with essential public health measures, which together with inoculation, are the only means

of eliminating transmission.

As Andrews stated this morning, the mandates were not “about stopping people from going to work, they’re about making sure we can open up. They’re about making sure people can go to work, that people can be safe and that we can defend and deliver our roadmap for opening. that’s what the national plan is all about.”

The mandate initiative came after corporate leaders issued Andrews stern warnings against any delay to the implementation of the “roadmap.” In comments to the media, for instance, Victorian Chamber of Commerce chief executive Paul Guerra declared: “The government has committed to its roadmap and must deliver what it promised Victorians. Businesses have remained shut long enough, workers have gone without jobs and children have been kept home from school.”

A staggered resumption of full, in-person teaching is to begin next week, under conditions in which hundreds of children and young people have contracted the virus while learning from home. The state lockdown is to be ended later this month, with many other restrictions to be dispensed with in early November.

Yesterday’s tally means that the growth of infections is outpacing the modelling upon which the reopening is based. The predictions, prepared by the Burnet Institute, predicted that the state would reach daily cases exceeding 1,400 no sooner than October 19. The modelling, moreover, forecast a 61 percent likelihood that the reopening would result in hospitals and their intensive care units being overwhelmed, along with more than 2,000 fatalities before the end of the year.

Victoria’s hospital system is already in breakdown. Mick Stephenson, executive director of clinical operations for Ambulance Victoria said today: “This is the slowest the health system has ever worked because of COVID-19.” Wait times for triple-0 emergency calls have blown out, ambulances are ramping outside of hospitals for hours on end, and some major medical facilities have been compelled to pause their intake of COVID patients because they cannot keep up with demand.

This is occurring under conditions where there are only around 400 hospitalised COVID patients in the state, compared with the 1,950 to 4,400 the Burnet Institute predicts there will be in December. For months, Andrews claimed that his government had or would create an additional 4,000 COVID beds to cope with any surge in hospitalisations. As he was unveiling his government’s roadmap, and the dire modelling upon which it is based, Andrews revealed that the extra resources were a fiction and would not be forthcoming.

The situation in Victoria is part of a national crisis, with hospitals in NSW also predicted to be overwhelmed later this month. The state government there predicts that a “code black” will be declared, triggering the institution of a triage system under which some critically-ill patients may be denied care, leaving them to die.

Australian this morning reported on a “discussion paper” drawn up by top health officials from four states and presented to a recent urgent roundtable of health ministers.” It reportedly warned “that the health system is so overburdened by Covid-19 that people are dying from other treatable conditions as patients are stuck in ambulances and the corridors of emergency departments, unable to access a hospital bed.”

The health officials noted that while much of the focus of public discussion has been on whether ICU wards will cope with a surge of COVID admissions, what is posed is a breakdown of the entire healthcare system. Treatments from cancers, traumatic injuries and other serious health conditions are all being compromised and will be even more as the crisis deepens.

This is an indictment of all of the governments, state and federal, Labor and Liberal. For decades, they have gutted public healthcare funding. Over the 18 months of the pandemic, they have made various promises to rectify the situation, including Andrews’ pledge of 4,000 additional beds, but they have come to nothing.

Despite the potential for a catastrophe, the reopening proceeds apace. The NSW government is lifting the state’s lockdown on October 11, followed by the end of the restrictions in Victoria. In Queensland, where there is no lockdown, the rugby league grand final is proceeding this weekend before tens of thousands of spectators, despite transmission of the coronavirus. And international travel is set to resume next month, as governments dispense with quarantines, contact-tracing and any pretence of seeking to curb the spread of the virus.

The critical issue is the independent intervention of the working class. Millions of people are hostile to the homicidal reopening drive. These sentiments can only go forward through the formation of workplace rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions, to enforce workplace shutdowns and safety measures, and the development of a socialist movement to fight for health and lives, not corporate profit.



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