

Australia: Victorian Labor government pressing ahead with reopening despite record surge

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The Labor government in Victoria is pressing ahead with a plan to rapidly lift inadequate restrictions and “reopen the economy,” even though the state is in the midst of the largest surge of COVID in any Australian jurisdiction since the pandemic began.

This profit-driven program was summed up on Tuesday. As Victoria reported 1,763 new infections, the greatest number recorded in any state, mass face-to-face teaching began to be resumed in the schools and construction sites were reopened after a two-week “pause,” while Premier Daniel Andrews insisted that there would be no delay of plans for the lifting of lockdown measures on October 28.

At a press conference outlining the new cases, Andrews touted the fact that the “reopening” was “only weeks away.” The widespread circulation of Delta, especially in Melbourne, the state capital, would not impact on this. “I don’t have any advice that sees us having to alter that [the roadmap] now,” Andrews said.

The Labor leader linked this to his government’s open abandonment last month of any pretence of seeking to eliminate transmission in the current outbreak. “We’re not chasing zero, that’s really clear,” he declared.

At the same time, he defended the inadequate restrictions currently in place, which have allowed the rapid spread of the Delta variant because they have largely been limited to retail shutdowns and limitations on individual movement, rather than workplaces. “We have more cases than we would like, but without a lockdown on at the moment we would have many many more cases and many more people in hospital,” Andrews said.

Even if his premise were accepted, it only underscores the criminality of the Labor government’s plans to end the lockdown and force the population to “live with the virus.” The removal of those restrictions touted by Andrews will inevitably lead to “many many more cases and many more people in hospital.”

The modelling upon which the government plan is based

forecasts a 61 percent likelihood that the hospital system will be overwhelmed and predicts as many as 2,000 total deaths from the outbreak by the end of the year if restrictions are ended as scheduled. Tuesday’s infection tally, moreover, means that the state is exceeding the upper limit of cases upon which that modelling, conducted by the Burnet Institute, was based. It anticipated that daily cases would not reach 1,400, before October 19.

The Victorian Labor government’s open adoption of policies indistinguishable from the “herd immunity” program that has led to mass illness and death in the US, Europe and internationally, is highly significant. Through much of the pandemic, the upper-middle class milieu of Labor Party supporters, trade union officials and pseudo-left organisations, have presented the subordination of public health to profit as the preserve of the Liberal-National Coalition and a product of their right-wing proclivities.

The Socialist Alternative organisation, for instance, repeatedly presented Labor, and the Andrews government in particular, as an alternative to pro-business pandemic policies of Coalition Prime Minister Scott Morrison and the state administration in New South Wales.

A typical article in its *RedFlag* publication from November last year, for instance, declared: “The success of the lockdown in Victoria has set the bar. It is hard to imagine that a Liberal state government would have imposed a lockdown if Andrews had not stood his ground and defied Morrison, the media and the bosses and won and gained record levels of support in the latest opinion polls.”

Such assertions were always based on falsification. The Andrews government joined with the other state and territory administrations and the federal coalition in a “national cabinet” established at the beginning of the pandemic.

In April 2020, they all rejected advice from epidemiologists for a strategy aimed at eradicating COVID, on the grounds that this would be too costly. Instead, they

adopted a policy of “suppression,” which amounted to accepting the inevitability of ongoing outbreaks, and seeking to curb them with limited mitigation measures subordinated to corporate profit interests.

Under this program, governments repeatedly resisted demands for the introduction of lockdowns, even when there was substantial transmission. Such was the case with the measures hailed by *RedFlag* late last year. Far from defying the federal authorities and big business, the Andrews government delayed the implementation of sharp lockdown measures until the virus was already circulating out of control. It only instituted “stage four” measures, including some workplace shutdowns, when the hospital system was on the brink of collapse and amid mass anger within the working class.

The Victorian government has been fully supportive of a national shift from the mitigation/suppression strategy to a policy of letting the virus rip. In July and August, it joined with all the other governments in adopting a “national plan” for an end to lockdowns, once 70 percent of the adult population was vaccinated, and a broader reopening at 80 percent.

These arbitrary targets have been met in countries, such as Israel and Singapore, but have failed to halt surges of the pandemic. These targets are still being used as the justification for lifting all other public health measures.

In line with this agenda, the Victorian authorities are carrying out policies that are of an identical class character to their counterparts in the other states and at the federal level.

Because most workplaces have remained open throughout the current outbreak, infections have overwhelmingly been centred in the working-class northern and western suburbs of Melbourne, on some days accounting for 90 percent or more of cases. With the spread of the virus throughout the city, infections are also beginning to spike in the working-class southeast, which accounted for 370 of Tuesday’s infections. Like the other state governments where outbreaks have occurred, the Andrews administration has rejected calls for broader workplace shutdowns, except the two-week “pause” on construction, which ended as case numbers skyrocketed this week.

Despite the crisis in the hospitals during the last outbreak in late 2020, nothing has been done to boost the capacity of the healthcare system. A pledge by Andrews to establish 4,000 additional beds was dropped the same time that the dangerous reopening was announced.

Yesterday it was revealed that 39 COVID patients had been admitted to Victorian hospitals over the previous 24-hours, while the number of those critically ill and requiring intensive care unit (ICU) beds and ventilators both

increased by 21. That represented a surge of 40 percent for those on ventilators and 20 percent for those in ICU in a single day. The demand for ambulances is resulting in unprecedented wait times, while doctors are warning in the media that hospital beds for those suffering serious illness are already hard to come by.

It is under these conditions that the schools reopened for mass attendance on Tuesday, first with Year 12 students, ahead of a staggered full return that will be completed over the coming weeks. Thousands of the state’s infections have been among children and teenagers, under conditions in which the schools have been closed or have catered to only a small cohort. Teachers have expressed opposition over the return, while some students, especially in the working-class suburbs hit hardest, have stated that they are fearful of infection and may not attend.

The Labor government is relying upon the corporatised unions to suppress the opposition. In the education sector, they are collaborating with the school reopening, and in health, they are seeking to prevent any action by medical staff against the ending of the lockdown and for increased funding to the public hospitals.

For their part, the pseudo-left organisations, such as Socialist Alternative, continue to try and divert mass anger behind Labor and the unions, even as they impose the same pro-business policies as the Liberal-National governments.

The actions of the Victorian government, and of the Labor Party more broadly, again demonstrate that the fight for health and safety and a scientifically grounded program to eradicate the coronavirus, requires an independent movement of the working class. Rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions, must be established in the schools, hospitals and workplaces to coordinate opposition and resist the reopening drive.

Above all, what is posed is the need to fight for socialism, a society in which social interests, including to health and life take precedence, not private profit.



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