Pandemic accelerates Australia's class divide

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One of the most socially-explosive reasons for Australia's new anti-democratic electoral laws is that the COVID-19 pandemic has intensified the already staggering levels of wealth and health inequality, producing mounting class tensions.

At all costs, the ruling class must try to shut down political opposition, muzzle dissent and confine debate to official channels within the existing media and parliamentary establishment.

New data on COVID deaths lays bare in the most graphic form the terrible human cost of social inequality.

An Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) report released last month found that during the first year of the pandemic there were almost four times as many COVID deaths recorded for people in the lowest socioeconomic group compared with those in the highest.

The report also found that health care workers, who have been placed on the frontline of the pandemic in chronically under-staffed and under-funded public hospitals, were 2.7 times as likely to contract COVID-19 as the general community.

These are just two indicators of a conscious policy to impose the burden of the pandemic on working class households for the benefit of the financial elite. Profits are being prioritised over health and lives.

This class divide will intensify as Liberal-National and Labor governments alike accelerate the "reopening" of the economy despite the deadly Delta variant surge.

In the name of "living with the virus," the capitalist class and its political servants are insisting that more working class people must "die with the virus."

The party de-registration laws are a bid to stifle the resulting political disaffection and block it from any expression in the looming federal election, which is due to be held by May.

In particular, the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), the only political party opposing the homicidal "reopening" drive, will be barred from having its party name on ballot papers unless it files an expanded list of 1,500 electoral members—triple the current requirement—by December 2, even amid a raging pandemic.

The AIHW report confirmed that the pattern of death is entirely predictable. It listed the well-known reasons: "[H]igher population density housing, reduced capacity to work from home … lower levels of income and education, and lack of private transport to access health care, as well as more need to use public transport."

Further analysis by the *Guardian* showed that nearly 60 percent of people who have died during the Delta wave in the state of New South Wales lived in the southwestern or western Sydney local health districts, home to 1.8 million mainly working class people.

These are the suburbs with the highest proportions of workers, mostly young, who have had to keep working throughout the pandemic—including in factories, construction and other non-essential industries—and potentially bring infections back into large households.

By contrast, the more affluent local health districts of Sydney, southeastern Sydney and northern Sydney, which boast a population of about 2.4 million, accounted for 26 percent of the deaths.

Likewise, in Melbourne, the next biggest city, one of its most disadvantaged local government areas—Hume in the northern suburbs—had nearly a third of the state of Victoria's fatalities during Delta. Almost another 30 percent occurred in the similar nearby areas of Moreland and Whittlesea.

Another factor in Australia's "death divide" has been unequal access to vaccines. Despite repeated government pledges that they would be prioritised, some of the most vulnerable people, such as health, aged and disability workers, teachers and indigenous

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people, still have not been inoculated, even months after the protracted government delay in the delivery of vaccines.

Dr George Disney, a research fellow in social epidemiology at the University of Melbourne, told the *Guardian*: "It's almost like society is designed to deliver COVID to the most disadvantaged.

"The people on the lowest incomes, the people who are most unlikely to be able to work from home… They're often doing jobs that involve contact with other disadvantaged groups, people with disability, people in aged care. We knew this before COVID started."

Governments are also cutting off even the inadequate income support initially provided to workers unable to work because of the pandemic. Despite limited JobKeeper wage subsidies and social security benefit supplements last year, the AIHW report found that almost two-thirds of JobKeeper recipients reported they had reductions in their income.

These payments have long ceased, and other schemes are being withdrawn, deliberately forcing working class people into low-paid, insecure and unsafe jobs, helping employers to restructure their operations to exploit cheap labour.

Meanwhile, as the federal government has now admitted, at least $27 billion of the more than $90 billion poured into business pockets by JobKeeper went to companies whose turnover either increased or did not drop enough to qualify for the handouts.

Workers are starting to resist the destruction of jobs, conditions and their basic right to a safe workplace. However, this assault cannot be fought solely on a national basis. What is needed is an independent mass movement of the working class to fight for the eradication of COVID-19 worldwide.

That strategy will be explained at the October 24 online webinar "How to end the pandemic: The case for eradication," organised by the *World Socialist Web Site* and the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees. All those looking for the way to save lives should register and share the event as broadly as possible.

At the same time, the party re-registration laws must be defeated. The basic democratic right to stand for election on a party platform must be defended. Above all, the working class must have a voice, to fight for its basic social rights, not least to life and health.

That is why we are calling on all WSWS readers and supporters in Australia to sign up as an SEP electoral member today and help us provide the necessary socialist alternative.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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