

Australian Labor state government leads “reopening” stampede amid record COVID infections

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Two events yesterday summed up the acceleration of corporate-driven efforts by all Australian governments to herd the population into “living with” the deadly COVID-19 Delta virus despite continuing record numbers of infections and deaths.

The first was the Victorian state Labor Party government’s ending of Melbourne’s already limited lockdown. This was labelled a UK-style “Freedom Day” by the media and accompanied by wall-to-wall coverage of what appeared to be small numbers of people celebrating at the stroke of midnight yesterday morning.

There was no such coverage of the thousands of workers, parents and students who are deeply concerned at the risks to their health and lives, particularly as all schools are reopened in the state by November 5, just after vaccinated international travelers are permitted to arrive without quarantining.

The second event occurred at Sydney airport. Alan Joyce, the boss of Qantas, one of the country’s biggest companies, staged a media conference to announce faster plans to restart an entire range of international flights from November 1. Standing behind him, grinning, were Prime Minister Scott Morrison and New South Wales (NSW) Premier Dominic Perrottet.

Morrison and Perrottet nodded happily as Joyce outlined, in interminable detail, his company’s speed-up of its schedule to resume extensive international and domestic flights. The pair were later given time to express their appreciation for Joyce’s extended sales pitch.

Taken together, the two events and the saturation promotion of them by every media outlet, including the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, demonstrated the total subservience of the country’s governments, both Liberal-National and Labor, to the financial elite’s determination to fully “reopen” the economy at breakneck speed so that unrestrained profit-making activities can be resumed.

Almost simultaneously with the Qantas event, Victorian

Premier Daniel Andrews said his government would match Perrottet’s administration in NSW by allowing overseas arrivals from November 1, with “no hotel quarantine” and “no isolation” at home, even though Victoria’s population is suffering by far the highest infection rates since the pandemic began last year.

Andrews also said 5,500 people would be allowed to attend next week’s Derby Day horse races, another potential super-spreader event. That is on top of his government sponsoring a music concert of 4,000 people tonight and allowing 10,000 people to be at the Melbourne Cup race on November 2.

Even as Andrews jumped to outdo Perrottet, his government said 16 deaths had been recorded in the previous 24 hours—the highest daily total for any Australian jurisdiction so far this year—and more than 2,200 new infections, the third highest daily toll yet since the start of the pandemic.

In neighbouring NSW, where the Delta outbreak began in June, the daily infections have begun to rise to near 400 after Sydney’s partial lockdown was ended last week.

Moreover, the official figures in both state are likely to understate the true numbers, because testing levels have dropped amid all the government and media hype about “Freedom Day.” Today, just 64,118 tests were reported in the previous 24 hours in NSW, which has a population of 8.2 million, and there were only slightly more, 73,000, in Victoria, which has 6.7 million people.

Today’s editorial in the *Australian Financial Review*, the voice of big business, expressed appreciation for Andrews’ abandonment in recent weeks of any effort to eliminate the virus. It said Melbourne was reopening with over 2,000 cases and 16 fatalities, “which would have been considered disastrous only weeks ago.” The editorial also noted that the state’s reopening had been “supercharged” by the early return of Qantas flights to overseas cities.

Face-to-face teaching in Melbourne’s over-crowded and

ill-equipped school classrooms is being resumed in such dangerous conditions despite there being less than seven weeks to go in the final term of the year, in order to ensure that all parents can be pressured into returning to physical workplaces as well.

These moves also mean that the pandemic will soon take hold in other Australian states and territories—Queensland, Western Australia, South Australia, Tasmania and the Northern Territory—where the Delta variant has been contained and eliminated, aided by border closures.

“Importation of the Delta variant into every Australian jurisdiction is now inevitable,” the modelling consortium led by the Doherty Institute said in updated infection scenarios released last month.

If the states and territories failed to maintain optimal test, trace, isolate and quarantine measures, the update warned that, even with low initial seeding of cases, there would be 750,000 symptomatic infections in a six-month period. Of these people, 27,000 would end up in hospital, 4,358 in intensive care units and 4,108 would likely die.

This points to the reality of the Doherty modelling, on which all the governments have agreed, via the bipartisan “National Cabinet,” to end lockdowns and most other safety restrictions once the national double vaccination rate reaches 80 percent of those over 16. That is about 65 percent of the entire population, leaving nearly 10 million people unprotected, including all children under the age of 12.

At present, the national vaccination rate remains just over 70 percent, with some states lagging way behind, largely because of protracted delays in the shambolic vaccination rollout. Yet the federal, Victorian and NSW governments have cast aside even the homicidal “roadmap” adopted by the National Cabinet in order to meet the demand of the corporate boardrooms to accelerate the process.

That demand was underscored by an article in the *Financial Times*, the London-based voice of international finance capital, in late September, which reported: “Increasingly fed up with COVID-19 lockdown policies, and a failure to rollout vaccines that would allow the economy to open up, the leaders of many of Australia’s biggest companies—including BHP, Macquarie and Qantas—have said the nation will have to learn to ‘live with the virus,’ as many other countries have done.”

Numbers of health experts, as well as doctors, nurses, paramedics and other health workers, have expressed concern about the likely outcomes, with chronically underfunded public hospitals already barely able to cope. “Ramping” of ambulances, waiting for hours outside hospitals while trying to treat their COVID-infected patients, has become commonplace.

The number of people in Victorian hospitals with

COVID-19 currently sits at 770, with 144 of those receiving intensive care, and 90 requiring ventilation. There are now 469 people in NSW hospitals with COVID-19, 123 of whom are in intensive care units.

Ordinary working-class people are also opposed to the stampede back into schools and workplaces. They are the ones most likely to suffer serious infections and deaths. A recent study reported 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.

In a rare media report of such concern, University of NSW Sydney senior lecturer in the faculty of medicine and health, Ben Harris-Roxas, told the *Saturday Paper* there was a “heightened state of agitation” for many people amid the uncertainty of the transition to a new “COVID normal.”

The Andrews Labor government’s pivotal part in this deadly program shows that Labor represents no alternative to the Liberal-Nationals, on this or any other issue confronting the working class. Backed by the trade unions, Labor is spearheading the corporate drive and seeking to suppress working-class resistance to it.

The only alternative is the development of an independent movement of the working-class, fighting for the elimination of COVID. That requires the formation of workplace rank-and-file committees, completely independent of the unions, and a socialist perspective that rejects the subordination of health and life to private profit.

The need for, and viability of, a worldwide program to eliminate the virus will be explained at this Sunday’s online global webinar hosted by the WSWs and the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), featuring a distinguished panel of scientists and epidemiologists, as well as parents and workers.



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