

Australia: Victorian Labor government plowing ahead with reckless pro-business “reopening”

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Having ended a lockdown last Friday, amid the highest levels of infection recorded in Australia since the pandemic began, the Labor government of Victoria is rushing to overturn the limited safety measures that remain, including attendance caps at venues and travel restrictions aimed at preventing the spread of the virus throughout the state.

The criminally-reckless policies epitomise the Australian political establishment’s open embrace of the “let it rip” program that has led to mass infections and deaths around the world.

In earlier stages of the pandemic, especially last year, Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews claimed to be prioritising public health. Under pressure from nurses, teachers and other sections of the working class, his government belatedly introduced a number of lengthy lockdowns. For this Andrews was vociferously denounced by the federal Liberal-National Coalition government and sections of the corporate media, which dubbed him “dictator Dan.”

Now, however, Andrews is racing with the state Coalition government in New South Wales, headed by Dominic Perrottet, an extreme right-wing free-marketeer, to see who will deliver the demands of big business most rapidly. The two governments are seeking to outdo one another in recklessness, the subordination of health to profit and the implementation of policies all but guaranteed to result in a massive spread of disease.

When Andrews lifted the lockdown on Friday, based on the arbitrary figure of 70 percent adult inoculation, there were 2,189 cases, the third-highest daily tally since the pandemic began, and 16 deaths in Victoria, the most in a 24-hour period this year. The government nevertheless presided over a UK-style “freedom day,” encouraging large celebrations in the streets, permitting mass attendance at the horse races and urging residents to turn out to hospitality venues.

In an earlier period, when they maintained a pretence of concern over the transmission of the virus, state government leaders often said it would be irresponsible to change public health policies, before the effects of previous alterations to restrictions was known. Not so now.

On Sunday, some 48 hours after the end of the lockdown, and before its consequences could possibly be known, Andrews’ declared that his government was bringing forward the next “phase” of the reopening from early November, to this Friday. The nominal reason was the approach of the 80 percent adult vaccination rate.

But little attempt was made to hide the real impetus, with big business literally writing the script.

On Friday, Victorian Chamber of Commerce Paul Guerra issued a statement declaring: “The Victorian Chamber hopes that on Sunday, Premier Daniel Andrews will announce that 80 per cent settings will be implemented on Friday, and that’s when we can lift the lid and show the rest of Australia that we are back.” This was necessary, he wrote, because “many businesses won’t start making a profit” until the next round of restrictions are lifted.

Andrews delivered. He explained that the 80 percent changes would come into effect, before that figure had actually been reached, so that “it’s as a proper Melbourne Cup long weekend, informally, for people to travel, to book holidays and do all sorts of things.” The cup is one of the most lucrative annual sporting events in the country, and is to proceed in front of 10,000 spectators. The gaming and racing industry has lobbied for months against any prospect of the race being cancelled, or proceeding without spectators.

The measures that come into effect on Friday include an end to travel restrictions between metropolitan Melbourne and regional Victoria. This means that the virus will spread throughout the state, including in regional areas where transmission has been low or non-existent, and the public healthcare system is even more crisis-ridden and resource-deprived than in the state capital.

In what can only be described as a state-funded super-spreading event, the Victorian government had already announced that it would hold a 4,000 person concert in Melbourne next Friday. Now, it has unveiled a roadshow of official concerts next weekend in many of Victoria’s regional centres, including Avenel, Ballarat, Bendigo, Castlemaine, Geelong, Gippsland, and Warrnambool. Advertising describes

the travelling show as “descending upon regional Victoria.” In effect, it will be COVID-19 “descending upon” many of these areas.

All retail, gyms and other non-essential venues will be able to open throughout the state, at this point with nominal density limits of one person per square metre. In pubs, as many as 500 patrons can be in outdoor areas, along with weddings, funerals and religious services.

The government is already foreshadowing a further reopening late next month, with almost all restrictions being abolished. There would be a “massive change,” Andrews said, declaring that his vision was for 80,000 spectators to attend the Boxing Day cricket match on December 26.

The campaign to “normalise” the virus, backed by a media blitz proclaiming “freedom” and the importance of the festive season, is a cynical attempt to exploit the understandable desire of ordinary people to socialise, visit relatives and to return to those workplaces that have been closed, under conditions where many have been forced to subsist on poverty-level government assistance.

But the “freedom” being touted is for big business to make maximum profits, whatever the consequences for the pandemic and health. The government’s own modelling predicts that cases will continue to rise well into the new year. And the vaccination targets that it touts as a silver bullet have failed to halt massive surges of the virus in countries that have pursued a similar reopening.

Already, teachers and school students are on the frontlines. Amid a staggered return to in-person teaching, and without all age cohorts back in the classrooms, more than 200 schools have been hit with COVID infections this month. The government has signalled that it is moving away from the previous model of closing an entire school when a case is detected. As in the US and Britain, where hundreds of thousands of children have been struck with the virus, those who contract the disease will be sent home, while business will continue as normal.

There is every prospect that the reopening will crash the hospital system. The government’s own modelling, conducted by the Burnet Institute, predicted a 61 percent likelihood that patient demand would exceed existing capacity.

Last week, the *Age* carried a report on “seismic changes” in the hospital system, unlike any that had occurred in decades. Based on the statements of anonymous health officials and workers in the sector, the publication revealed that:

- Because of bed shortages, “Every day across Melbourne, intensive care patients are zigzagging across the city, and are being transported as far away as Geelong, en route to an empty bed.”

- “Orthopedic surgeons, consultant physicians, theatre staff, neurologists and even psychiatrists are being seconded to help in coronavirus wards and moved into other sections of hospitals to help with the COVID-19 response.”

- With virtually all elective surgeries already postponed,

“there had been high-level discussions about the prospect of creating ‘streamline’ hospitals for emergency surgeries like ruptured aortas, heart attacks, organ transplants and trauma incidents, and how this could be done without compromising patient safety.”

- “Major hospitals with pediatric units are also weighing up whether to close down those wards and send all children to the Royal Children’s Hospital or Monash Children’s Hospital.”

- Private hospitals are taking most emergency and trauma surgeries, because the public hospitals cannot cope.

- Other states have been asked to have nurses and doctors on standby, for volunteer dispatch to Victoria, because it does not have enough health staff.

- “If the number of COVID patients was to grow by another 200 people Category One elective surgeries—meant to be performed within 30 days—could be paused.”

- And most chillingly, “If more than 2,500 COVID-19 patients are admitted to hospital—a scenario seen in 63 percent of road map simulations conducted by the Burnet Institute—hospitals may only treat the sickest patients.”

This is the reality, behind all the declarations of “freedom,” a “return to normal” and the fraudulent official claims that the pandemic is all but over.

The Labor government, like its federal and state counterparts, is depending on the corporatised unions to enforce this brutal agenda. In the health sector, the unions, allied to the government, have suppressed widespread anger over staffing and resource shortages for years. And in the schools, the Australian Education Union functions as little more than a government public relations firm, dutifully passing on official policy, including the dangerous school reopening.

The fight for health and safety requires an independent political movement of the working class. Rank-and-file committees are needed in all workplaces, to resist the “reopening” drive and to force a shutdown of the schools and non-essential production while the virus is rife. Above all, what is posed is the need for a socialist perspective that places social need, including to health and life itself, above corporate profit.



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