Australia's reckless pro-business reopening proceeding apace as international travel resumes

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With extraordinary rapidity, Australian governments at the state and federal level have dispensed with the vast majority of COVID restrictions as they impose the homicidal and pro-business program of "living with the virus" on a population that overwhelmingly opposes the subordination of health and safety to profit.

In the latest step, international travel without any quarantine requirement is beginning from today. The country's two most populous states, which are also the centres of COVID outbreaks, Victoria and New South Wales (NSW), have reopened all non-essential businesses, resumed mass gatherings and abandoned any attempt to limit the spread of the virus to regional and rural areas. And in other states, where there is currently no transmission, the governments have drawn up plans explicitly premised on allowing the highly-infectious Delta variant to enter their jurisdictions.

The completely bipartisan character of this campaign is demonstrated by its protagonists.

In Victoria, where there are well over 1,500 infections a day and the healthcare system is in unprecedented crisis, the Labor government of Premier Daniel Andrews is racing to "return to normal," whatever the infections and deaths, as quickly as possible. A Labor government in the Australian Capital Territory is doing the same. In New South Wales (NSW), the rush to end restrictions is being implemented by Liberal-National Coalition leader Dominic Perrottet, a hard-right free marketeer.

And this drive is being overseen by the federal Coalition government, with the full support of the Labor opposition.

The Greens have not opposed the reckless measures, and the trade unions are directly enforcing the drive to herd hundreds of children and teachers into unsafe workplaces and hundreds of thousands more into potentially dangerous workplaces.

The unanimity of the ruling elite and all of its political instruments is part of an international process, with governments that had previously implemented programs of eliminating or suppressing the virus abandoning them under intense pressure from the largest global corporations. New Zealand has "transitioned" away from elimination, while Singapore and other south-east Asian countries where strong mitigations limited transmission have shifted, creating the conditions for mass outbreaks.

Australian governments always rejected an elimination program on the grounds that it was too costly. But at various points, especially last year, they were compelled to institute lockdowns under pressure from teachers, health staff and other sections of the working class, and for fear that even a relatively small mass outbreak could rapidly overwhelm the underfunded healthcare systems.

As a result, at the end of June, 2021, there had been just over 30,000 infections throughout the entire pandemic, one of the lowest rates in the world. Now, however, the total case figure has surpassed 170,000. The failure to institute adequate lockdown measures when Delta struck Sydney in June, the spread of the virus to Victoria, and the inadequacy of the restrictions eventually put in place have resulted in 140,000 infections in four months, compared with 30,000 in the first 16 months of the crisis.

Previously, high cases numbers were cause for greater restrictions, now they are accompanied by their rollback. Indicating the speed of the reopening, it was only on October 11 that limited lockdown was ended in NSW and October 22 that the same measures were ended in Victoria. Both state governments carried a further relaxation a week after the lifting of the lockdowns, with substantial increases to caps on attendance at high-risk public venues, in homes and at mass events.

The situation is exemplified by the fact that the

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Melbourne Cup horse race is being held in Melbourne tomorrow in front of 10,000 spectators as the Delta strain is still running rampant in the city. The Victorian government has sponsored mass concerts in Melbourne and regional centres, while the NSW government has also presided over racing events.

Mass in-person teaching has resumed, with the Committee for Public Education tracking hundreds of school closures over recent weeks after infections were detected. In Victoria, the Labor government discarded the previous model of closing entire schools when cases occur in favour of limited shutdown of classes. This is in line with the school reopening models of the United States and Britain, which have resulted in hundreds of thousands of children contracting the virus.

In the latest step, both the NSW and Victorian governments have ended bans on travelling from the state capitals to regional areas. This effectively ends any attempt to limit the geographical extent of COVID transmission.

Already, the Hunter New England region of NSW is one of the main COVID hotspots, demonstrating the speed with which the virus can spread outside Sydney. High regional infections are hitting vulnerable communities, including those with lower rates of vaccination, with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) reporting last week that every day 30 to 40 indigenous people were contracting the virus, accounting for up to 10 percent of all NSW cases.

The resumption of intra-state travel has sparked warnings that rudimentary regional healthcare systems could be overwhelmed. In comments to the *Guardian*, Peta Rutherford, the CEO of the Rural Doctors' Association of Australia, said "We only need a couple hundred unvaccinated people to get sick to overwhelm a regional health service. The intensive care capacity in our regional hospitals is generally under 10 beds. They still have the heart attacks, the car accidents, those presentations that will also require intensive care services."

The frenzied reopening campaign has been marked by governments discarding restrictions, before the full implications of their previous policies have become clear. The push is now on for even limited caps on attendance to be overturned prior to the Christmas/New Year holiday season, with Victorian Premier Andrews declaring that his vision is for attendance of 100,000 or more at cricketing and other events.

The resumption of international travel is part of this holiday season "normalisation." Vaccinated international arrivals no longer need to quarantine after arriving in NSW or Victoria, with both states quietly abandoning previous talk of a home isolation system. This means that any new variants that develop internationally will rapidly re-enter the community. Outbound travel restrictions, under which exemptions were required to leave the country, have also been scrapped.

The travel policy has exemplified the corporate-driven character of the reopening. The fast-tracking of travel to November 1 was announced last month by Qantas CEO Alan Joyce, with NSW Premier Perrottet and Prime Minister Scott Morrison standing behind him, nodding and grinning their approval.

Last year, Qantas was the recipient of more than $1.2 billion in government handouts, in the form of direct payments, underwritten flights and waived charges, as it sacked or stood down some 10,000 employees. The financial press has enthusiastically reported Qantas's boast of having sold 500,000 tickets in the past fortnight, without any consideration of the implications of this mass transit for the pandemic.

Medical experts are increasingly being treated as an annoyance whose days of prominence are over. NSW Chief Health Officer Kerry Chant, who was on television every day not so long ago, has all but disappeared from public view. The Andrews government announced yesterday, through a spokesperson of the health department, that it would no longer be holding daily press briefings on the COVID crisis. The official said that with the reopening, it was not necessary to focus so closely on the number of people being infected by the virus.

The working class must oppose the reopening drive and fight for a program that prioritises health and safety, and all social interests, above the profit drive of the corporations. This requires the formation of independent workplace committees to carry out such a struggle, and a socialist perspective that rejects the domination of the banks and big business over every aspect of society, including public health.

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