

Australian governments lifting all safety restrictions as Delta outbreaks hit schools

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Australian governments in the most populous states of Victoria and New South Wales (NSW) are rapidly dispensing with the few coronavirus safety restrictions that remain after lockdowns were lifted last month. Their Labor and Liberal-National counterparts in states where the virus has been effectively eliminated have all adopted “roadmaps” explicitly premised on allowing COVID to re-enter their jurisdictions.

Having complained of “risk aversion” in the population and plotted to do away with lockdowns for months, the governments have overturned previous pandemic measures with extraordinary rapidity.

With the major corporations openly leading the charge, the state and federal administrations are seeking to ensure a full return to “normality” over the forthcoming holiday season. In reality, this is a normalisation of the continuous spread of the virus, and an insistence that workers and young people must accept widespread illness and daily deaths for the foreseeable future.

With the Delta variant still present in Victoria and NSW, the respective Labor and Liberal-National governments of those states have this month ended bans on travel from the capital cities, where outbreaks were previously centred, to the regions. Last week, they abolished restrictions on travel between the two states.

Melbourne and Sydney are also at the centre of a resumption of international travel, which began at the start of November, does not require any quarantining of arrivals, and is scheduled to ramp-up as Christmas and New Year’s approach.

From today, there are no caps on household gatherings in NSW and up to one thousand people can congregate outdoors. Limitations on attendance at mass seated venues, such as sporting stadiums, have been scrapped, nightclubs can reopen and for retail and hospitality, a one person per four square metres density limit has been reduced to two metres, a cosmetic restriction that will fail to prevent transmission.

These changes were not supposed to come into effect until next month, but have been brought forward by Dominic Perrottet, who has repeatedly accelerated the state’s reopening since being installed as NSW premier in September.

Similar policies were brought forward by Victorian Labor Premier Daniel Andrews late last month, including an end to

outdoor mask mandates, the reopening of entertainment venues at 75 percent capacity, unrestricted travel throughout the state, and the abandonment of other measures aimed at containing the virus. Labor is campaigning for an end to caution among ordinary people, subsidising the meals of people who dine out by up to 30 percent in a policy that also amounts to another government handout to business.

In both states, contact tracing is being wound back substantially. There is almost no attempt being made to track down casual contacts, those who may have temporarily come into contact with the virus. Isolation requirements for primary contacts are being significantly reduced.

The corporate press is jubilant. An article in the Murdoch-owned *Australian* today was typical, with its headline proclaiming that it is time to “Light the lights as the shackles come off in NSW and Victoria.” The article is just one of innumerable examples in which the official media presents the ending of basic public health measures as steps towards “freedom,” all but openly adopting the positions of the extreme right-wing anti-lockdown movement.

The media has touted a decline in case numbers in Victoria and NSW, as well as the fact that the hospital systems of both states have yet to enter a complete collapse, as vindication of this policy. “Fears that the easing of pandemic restrictions would lead to a rapid rise in the number of Covid-19 infections appear to have been unfounded,” the *Australian* stated.

But there are still well over one thousand cases a day in Victoria, a level unprecedented for any Australian jurisdiction prior to the current outbreak, and far higher than previous case numbers which resulted in the imposition of lockdowns. In NSW there are several hundred infections most days, still more than any time prior to July this year. Testing numbers in both states are down, frequently around 50,000 per day, compared with highs of over 200,000 in NSW and 100,000 in Victoria.

Moreover, it is well known that case numbers ebb and flow, but international experience demonstrates that the ending of all safety measures guarantees future surges. In a rare exception to the general tenor of media coverage, the *Australian* last week cited warnings from Professor Dale Fisher, an advisor to the World Health Organisation and the Singaporean government.

Fisher noted that the south-east Asian country, which has a

vaccination rate of over 90 percent among those aged over 12, is in the grips of an outbreak of three to four thousand infections per day. Three hundred deaths, or 70 percent of the total throughout the pandemic, have been recorded in the past month. Even if there was a “honeymoon” over the summer months, Fisher stated “You can expect this to happen in Australia” sometime next year.

The healthcare system remains in an unprecedented crisis. On Saturday night, the Victorian ambulance service almost declared a “code red,” because they were on the brink of having “exhausted their ability to meet demand.”

The Labor government and the media have touted the fact that COVID hospitalisations in the state are beneath modelling conducted by the Burnet Institute which found a 61 percent likelihood that the “reopening” would crash the hospital system.

But late last week the *Age* revealed that the authorities were effectively fudging the numbers. Officially there are 634 COVID patients in the state, 109 of them in intensive care units (ICUs). But this does not count 64 ICU patients who have been removed from the list because they are no longer infectious. Health authorities are reportedly preparing for a further “surge” of hospitalisations under conditions in which the majority of elective surgeries have already been indefinitely postponed because facilities are running at or above capacity.

The real character of the “reopenings,” as a corporate-driven offensive against the rights and health of the population, is summed up by the situation in the schools. Hundreds of thousands of pupils and their teachers have been returned to the classrooms in Victoria and NSW as the governments in those states, together with the unions, resume full in-person teaching.

In Victoria, the education sector now accounts for the highest number of COVID clusters by a substantial number. There are 513 active cases linked to school outbreaks compared with 118 in the second most affected industry, aged care. According to data compiled by the Committee for Public Education (CFPE), at least 25 schools currently have outbreaks involving double digit infections, while some 469 schools have been hit by the virus in term four alone.

The government has moved away from the previous practice of shutting schools when the virus is present. Instead, those who are infected are sent home. Their close contacts also must isolate, though in a school virtually everyone has potentially come into contact with one another. But even this inadequate measure is being wound back, with those deemed close contacts able to return in seven days if they register a negative test.

In NSW, at least 229 schools have recorded COVID infections this term, under conditions in which the full resumption of in-person teaching only began several weeks ago. Tomorrow, year 12 students will begin sitting the HSC after their widespread calls for a postponement or cancellation for safety reasons, and because they have been disadvantaged

by the pandemic were ignored by the government and education authorities.

The situation in NSW and Victoria is only the sharpest expression of a national program. All of other state and territory governments, the majority of them Labor-led, have now issued “roadmaps” for the ending of restrictions and the abolition of border closures, based on arbitrary vaccination targets either in the last two months of this year or early next.

The West Australian Labor government, which under public pressure has until now resisted the demand to reopen, last week outlined a timetable for the lifting of a border closure once state vaccination rates hit 90 percent, likely in February next year. The plan, which has been condemned as far too slow in the corporate media, reflects governments fears over widespread popular opposition to the ending of the safety measures. But it is explicitly premised on allowing the virus to enter the state and subsequent widespread transmission.

The jettisoning of earlier “strong suppression” policies by all Australian governments, and their open embrace of the deadly “live with the virus” program, is part of an international shift which has seen the abandonment of elimination by the Labour administration in New Zealand and dangerous reopening in a number of Asian states that previously prevented mass outbreaks of the virus.

This demonstrates that it is the working class, in Australia and internationally, which must fight for the elimination of the virus and an end to the pandemic in direct opposition to the subordination of health and safety to corporate profits by capitalist governments everywhere.



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