

Right-wing anti-vax forces incite furore over new pandemic powers bill in Australian state

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Over the past two weeks, relatively small—but heavily media-promoted—anti-lockdown and anti-vaccination protests in Melbourne have agitated against a new pandemic powers bill introduced by the Victorian state Labor Party government.

The bill was pushed through the state parliament's lower house in two days at the end of last month, but has yet to pass the upper house, where the government lacks a majority and depends on the support of the Greens and other parties.

Wider legitimate concerns about aspects of the bill have been exploited to assist the corporate-driven offensive to lift all remaining COVID-19 safety restrictions. The aim of this campaign is to force people to “live with” the deadly virus, despite continuing high numbers of infections, especially in the just-reopened schools.

A demonstration outside state parliament house last weekend featured anti-vaccination slogans such as “Vaxtoria,” alongside “kill the bill.” Participants blatantly defied mask-wearing and other social distancing requirements. One speaker was met with applause when he declared: “Thank you my fellow superspreaders.” He added: “We are the counter revolution and we will continue to march.”

At another such protest last Tuesday, far-right elements were joined by the Liberal Party's state shadow treasurer David Davis, who was billed as the headline speaker. He echoed his party's state leader Matthew Guy, who has accused Premier Daniel Andrews' government of drafting “the most extreme” pandemic legislation in Australia.

In fact, the legislation is similar to the laws in other states. Guy revealed the “economic reopening” agenda behind this demagogic campaign when he insisted that powers to impose restrictions were no longer needed.

That was because Andrews, as part of the bipartisan “National Cabinet,” had decreed that no further lockdowns would occur once adult double vaccination rates hit 80 percent (which is about 68 percent of the population).

The central thrust of the bill is actually to facilitate the removal of safety measures, and the abrupt sidelining of public health experts nationally, in order to satisfy the ruthless profit demands of the financial elite.

The Public Health and Wellbeing (Pandemic Management) Bill 2021 does this primarily by transferring powers to issue restriction orders from the state's chief health officer to the health minister.

As in the current legislation, such orders must be “reasonably necessary to protect public health.” But the bill specifies that the minister may take into account other factors, including “social and economic considerations,” and not just “public health.”

If the chief health officer disagrees with any lifting of restrictions, the government can reject that “advice.” This “advice” must be made available to the public, but only within 14 days, so that the public will be kept in the dark until long after the safety measures have been dismantled.

The bill amends the existing Public Health and Wellbeing Act 2008, mainly by inserting a new Part 8A—Protection of life and public health during pandemics. This new part empowers the premier to make pandemic or “pandemic potential” declarations that trigger the health minister's powers.

The main objection of the opposition is that, because “pandemic” is not defined, this could allow the premier to declare one even when infection numbers are initially low. Another objection is that declarations could be extended for successive three-month periods

until the premier decided that the pandemic no longer represented a serious risk to the community.

These alleged “dictatorial” aspects of the bill have been seized upon to demand the faster scrapping of safety measures and the lifting of all restrictions on people who refuse to be vaccinated. That demand has been assisted by anti-democratic features of the bill, including new limits on the power of either house of parliament to disallow ministerial orders, and the overturning of protection against self-incrimination when questioned by a health officer.

As pointed out by the Victorian Bar, representing barristers, the bill also allows a pandemic order to differentiate between people on the basis of certain attributes. These could include political beliefs, industrial activity or personal association with others, as well as health-related attributes such as vaccination, age, gender, disability or pregnancy.

The furore over the bill points to broader political questions raised by the response of capitalist governments, Labor and Liberal-National alike, to the pandemic—the greatest global public health crisis in a century.

While lockdowns and other restrictions have become absolutely necessary to combat the pandemic, along with vaccinations and other health measures, they have often been enforced in the most heavy-handed manner, especially in working class areas, fuelling justified hostility.

In both Melbourne and Sydney, in particular, police have harassed people, public housing estates have been targeted, and troops have been deployed to patrol streets, conduct house checks and staff checkpoints.

Restrictions also have been applied arbitrarily and inconsistently, imposed via frequently-changing ministerial decrees, issued without any democratic input, and with sweeping exceptions in favour of employers and other big business interests to allow factories, construction sites and other non-essential operations to continue.

These measures, presided over by the “National Cabinet” of federal, state and territory government leaders, also set repressive precedents and create a political atmosphere that can and will be used by the same capitalist governments to further bolster the police-military apparatus to suppress rising social discontent.

This underscores the necessity for the working class to take control of the pandemic response out of the hands of these governments. A democratically-controlled workers’ government would reorganise society along socialist lines, on the basis of human need, not corporate profit. This would include effective restrictions, quarantines and other measures to genuinely protect public health and safety, accompanied by adequate economic support for those unable to work or operate small businesses, implemented with popular consultation and input.



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