

Australian big business and anti-lockdown movement unite against state government's pandemic bill

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16 November 2021

A bill to enable the Victorian state government to declare a pandemic has been met with a revealing response. A de facto united front of business lobbies, anti-lockdown agitators, right-wing politicians and significant sections of the corporate media has formed to denounce the legislation.

Having heard the voice of big business, Labor Party Premier Daniel Andrews announced overnight amendments to the legislation. While the changes modify aspects of the bill criticised by lawyers' groups, they reportedly heighten the threshold required to declare a pandemic.

Elements of the bill, as it passed the Victorian parliament's lower house last month, were legitimately criticised. They included limiting the power of parliament to disallow ministerial orders, overturning the protection against self-incrimination when questioned by a health officer, and allowing authorities to differentiate between people based on attributes, which could include political beliefs.

The right-wing opposition to the legislation invoked these aspects of the law to denounce it as "dictatorial" and to demand the powers to invoke lockdowns be diluted or reversed.

In reality, the hysterical reaction to the bill is part of the ruling class drive to end all public health measures related to the coronavirus crisis, or even future pandemics. The campaign against the legislation occurs as state, territory and federal governments, including the Victorian Labor administration, dispense with lockdowns and other restrictions, in order to ensure a full resumption of corporate profit-making, even as the virus continues to circulate widely.

Over the weekend, the Victorian Chamber of

Commerce and Industry and the Australian Industry Group issued a joint statement, demanding that the legislation be amended. They outlined six concerns, but the first on the list summed up their opposition: "We don't believe the Government should have the right to make a 3 month pandemic declaration—it should be for a shorter period."

The statement declared that there "needs to be clarity and certainty as to who defines a pandemic," echoing claims in the corporate press that a pandemic could be declared with a relatively low number of cases of an infectious disease. It complained that "while the Government has acknowledged the need for business to be included on the advisory group it is not yet included in the legislation."

Sympathetic coverage of the statement of the press, and other condemnations of the bill, have referenced purportedly widespread "public concern" and opposition to the legislation.

The nature of this supposed concern was displayed at a rally on Saturday against the bill and vaccine mandates for essential workers, including in areas such as health and aged-care, as well as industries, like construction, that have seen widespread transmission.

A crowd numbering in the thousands marched through Melbourne, the state capital. Photos and video of the event indicate that most were not wearing masks.

Right-wing conspiracy theorists presented public health measures as part of a conspiracy by a global cabal to control the population, a trope frequently linked to anti-Semitism.

Some protesters adopted the violent iconography of the attempted fascist coup in the US on January, led by former President Donald Trump. A gallows with

several nooses was prominently displayed. Members of the Proud Boys were visible. The US branch of that extremist organisation played a central role in the assault on the US Capitol.

Notably, speakers associated with the far-right were joined by figures from the political establishment. Federal MP Craig Kelly told the crowd: “We are being governed by medical bureaucrats that are part of a mad, insane cult.” He said that it was necessary to protect children from vaccinations.

Until earlier this year, Kelly was a member of the federal Liberal-National Coalition government. His denunciations of vaccines and promotion of quack treatments for the coronavirus were tolerated by Prime Minister Scott Morrison, who repeatedly said Kelly was exercising his right to “free speech.”

Kelly defected from the government, as his more outlandish positions conflicted with its use of inoculation rates to justify the dangerous lifting of all other safety measures. He has joined the United Australia Party, headed by mining billionaire Clive Palmer, and will be one of its lead candidates in next year’s federal election.

The rally was also addressed by state Liberal MP Bernie Finn. Referring to Premier Andrews, Finn stated: “Despot Dan wants to become an emperor. Enough is enough.” Victorian Liberal leader Matthew Guy made similar comments at a rally the previous weekend, but sought to distance himself from the violent threats that were aired at Saturday’s event.

Throughout the pandemic, there has been a clear confluence between the activities of the right-wing anti-lockdown movement and the demands of the corporate elite for an end to safety measures in the interests of profit. The two camps are more openly embracing one another and an extremist milieu—largely cultivated through the agitation of the corporate press—is being integrated into official politics.

Politicians have increasingly adopted the language of the extreme right wing and anti-lockdown movement, with Morrison, for instance, telling the Victorian Chamber of Commerce last week that “freedoms must never be taken from us again.”

The state Liberal opposition has denounced the government’s amendments as merely cosmetic, and is demanding further changes to neuter the public health powers of the bill.

Yesterday, Andrews condemned the Liberals for “stirring up” right-wing extremists and “standing with people who are anti-vaxxers, sharing a podium with people who are anti-science, anti-vaccination.” He connected these statements, however, to his own government’s determination to dispense with public health measures. “The reason we’re open and the reason we’re going to stay open is people have got vaccinated,” he declared.

His comments pointed to a seeming paradox. The increasingly frenzied anti-lockdown rallies are being held after Victoria’s lockdown was ended, and as the state Labor government is racing to end all other safety measures.

Restrictions on travel have been dispensed with, mass gatherings have resumed and Andrews has made strident comments on the need to “live with the virus,” even if it causes “pain” and death. His government is set to jettison the handful of remaining measures as early as this week, including by ending indoor mask mandates, except for sensitive areas such as hospitals.

The hysterical anti-lockdown movement is being stoked up to intimidate and bury the widespread opposition among ordinary people to this profits-before-lives agenda. There is mass anger among teachers, students and parents, over the resumption of full in-person teaching, which has resulted in COVID cases at more than 500 schools in Victoria in term four. Health workers continue to report an unprecedented crisis in the hospitals, caused by decades of underfunding and exacerbated by the reopening policy.

The promotion of the anti-lockdown protests serves to shift official politics further to the right, and to legitimise the primary assault on democratic rights that is currently underway: the forcing of ordinary people into unsafe schools and workplaces in the interests of corporate profit.



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