

Australian state Labor government accelerates “reopening” amid fascistic anti-lockdown protests

Oscar Grenfell
20 November 2021

The state Labor government of Victoria has responded to fascistic anti-lockdown protests, backed by significant sections of the political and business elite, by dramatically accelerating its “roadmap” to lift the few COVID safety measures still in place.

The situation in Australia’s second-most populous state is the sharpest expression of a political dynamic unfolding nationally.

The largest corporations and most right-wing sections of the political establishment set the agenda of “living with the virus,” placing profits before lives. Where necessary and possible, they encourage fascistic anti-lockdown forces to intimidate the population and shift official politics further to the right.

The state and territory Labor premiers faithfully implement this pro-business program, insisting that while it will result in increased deaths and illness, it is necessary for the “economy,” i.e., corporate profits. Labor works with the trade unions to suppress any struggle by the working class against the reopening drive, giving the extreme-right a monopoly on public protest and opposition.

Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews announced on Thursday that almost all COVID safety measures would be lifted the next day, after weeks of continuous anti-lockdown protests outside the state parliament.

Victoria is still recording a thousand or more COVID infections a day, a month after a limited lockdown was ended. Yet, super-spreading events are being officially promoted. For the double-vaccinated, all caps on attendance at retail, hospitality and entertainment venues have been lifted. Lucrative cricket and other sporting matches can go ahead, with full stadiums. Check-in requirements and the need for businesses to have “COVID safe” plans are being wound back. Mask mandates have been lifted, except for health facilities, public transport and a few other settings.

Andrews declared that the state was “back to normal.” Meanwhile, the hospitals continue to be in an unprecedented

crisis, almost 600 schools have been hit with COVID outbreaks in the past month, and principled epidemiologists warn that the reopening will lead to a major surge of the virus, sooner or later.

The Labor government is putting into practice the “herd immunity” policies that have been demanded by those sections of the corporate elite that labelled Andrews “dictator Dan” for the limited lockdown measures instituted earlier in the pandemic, and by the right-wing agitators who have been calling for his murder over recent weeks. Labor’s actions express not only its cowardice, but also its subservience to the financial interests that have demanded an end to safety restrictions and promoted the anti-lockdown movement.

The accelerated reopening will further embolden the fascistic forces, which are now playing a prominent role in official politics, despite numbering only a few thousand and being reviled by the vast mass of the population.

Nominally, the protests have been held to oppose legislation that would give Victorian governments the power to declare pandemics and institute public health measures. Aspects of the bill that were criticised by lawyers’ groups have been excised in amendments, but the state Liberal opposition and the demonstrators continue to present the laws as a final step toward unchecked tyranny.

The bill, similar to measures in other states, is only a pretext for the mobilisations. The protesters themselves appear largely to be animated by hostility to vaccinations. They combine unhinged conspiracy theories with explicit calls for fascistic political violence.

The promotion of these disoriented forces by sections of the corporate media and the political establishment is part of a definite political strategy, motivated in part by a federal election that will be held early next year. The spectre of former US President Donald Trump looms large.

The protests outside state parliament, replete with mock gallows and other violent iconography, recall Republican-

instigated sieges of US state legislatures last year, similarly bound up with opposition to any safety measures. They also hark back to the January 6 coup attempt, when Trump mobilised a fascist mob to try to prevent the certification of his successor President Joe Biden.

Already, the right-wing rabble outside Victorian parliament has impacted on deliberations inside the building. The pandemic bill, which was set to be passed last week, is indefinitely stalled. Adam Somyurek, a Labor powerbroker who resigned from the party after media exposures of his branch-stacking activities, has returned to his parliamentary seat to help block the bill.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison's response to the Victorian rallies is also reminiscent of Trump, who condemned some violent excesses of his supporters, while egging them on with a wink-and-a-nod.

Responding to reports that protesters had spoken of killing Andrews and attacking other MPs, Morrison declared that "threats" and "violence" have "no place in Australia." But, he added, "there are many people who are feeling frustrated" and people had had a "gutful" after the past two years of the pandemic, during which "governments have been telling Australians what to do."

Morrison, who together with the state and territory leaders has falsely presented inoculation as a silver bullet against the virus that justifies the lifting of all other safety measures, has begun criticising state vaccine mandates, in another expression of solidarity with the right-wing protesters.

"Vaccines only are mandatory in cases where you've got health workers that are working with vulnerable people," Morrison said last week, adding: "You should be able to get a cup of coffee... whether you're vaccinated or not." Some of his state Liberal colleagues have gone further, appearing at the protests and hailing the participants as "wonderful Victorians" and "close friends."

Media reports over recent days have given a sense of who those "friends" are. They include one man who has now been charged by counter-terrorism police for encouraging others to attend the rallies with guns that could be used to shoot Andrews.

According to the *Age*, a key protest organiser, linked to the gallows, is a former financial services employee whose husband is the lead singer of a neo-Nazi metal band. *Crikey* has alleged that some websites promoting opposition to the pandemic bill are operated by Peter Harris, former chairman of Family First, a conservative Christian party that often collaborated with the Liberals, and his wife, whom the publication described as a "property mogul."

The United Australia Party (UAP), headed by mining billionaire Clive Palmer, has been heavily involved in the protests. Its most prominent member, former federal

government MP Craig Kelly, was a featured speaker at the rally last Saturday. The *Sydney Morning Herald* reported today that at least nine of the most prominent protest spokespeople, and alt-right media "personalities" promoting them, have spoken favourably of, or collaborated with, the UAP and Kelly. Some are planning to stand as UAP candidates at the next election.

The trajectory of the protests toward political violence is clear. Participants reportedly have been sharing the home addresses of Labor politicians. Yesterday it was reported that the daughter of Andy Meddick, an Animal Justice Party MP who has supported the pandemic bill, was allegedly assaulted in an incident apparently motivated by politics. In comments to the media, Meddick has stated his fear of a "US Capitol-style storming of Parliament House."

Sections of the Liberal-National Coalition are seeking to build a Trump-style movement as a base that can be mobilised during the next election, and more broadly, against the emerging social and political struggles of the working class. The right-wing protesters represent a tiny fraction of the population, emboldened by the support they receive from the political and state apparatus.

The overwhelming sentiments of the working class, including opposition to the endangerment of safety and lives in the interests of profit, and hostility to the accompanying stepped-up pro-business restructuring, can find no expression in official politics.

Working-class opposition is blocked and suppressed by Labor and the trade unions, as they implement the program of the corporations, and it is menaced by the state-orchestrated far-right mobs.

The greatest fear of the entire political establishment, Labor, the Liberals, and the extreme-right, is the independent political intervention of the working class. That is what is required to fight the pro-business pandemic policies and the official turn toward authoritarianism expressed in the deliberate elevation of fascist forces.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact