Emails reveal Australian state government rejected health officer's advice

Oscar Grenfell
23 November 2021

Emails released under parliamentary orders this week have shown that the Liberal-National Coalition government in New South Wales (NSW) repeatedly rejected official health advice during the height of the state's worst COVID-19 outbreak, despite insisting at the time that its policies were based on that advice.

The damning correspondence has confirmed what was plain at the time—the government's response to the spread of Delta was dictated by corporate profit interests and a discriminatory, hostile attitude to the working class, not by public health considerations. The emails indicate that the government rejected medical advice on more stringent lockdown measures, which could have curbed the outbreak, while imposing draconian law-and-order measures in working-class suburbs, for which there was no health basis.

The exchanges have broader ramifications. While they directly involve the NSW Coalition, the emails indirectly implicate the state Labor Party opposition, which has marched in lockstep with the government, as well as all the state and federal administrations, which have collaborated behind closed doors on every aspect of pandemic policy in an extra-constitutional "National Cabinet."

The emails concern the period after two Delta infections were identified in Sydney on June 16. These were the first known infections in the community in months, after the state had effectively eliminated the virus.

As with most Australian outbreaks since the pandemic began, the infections were linked to grossly-inadequate quarantine procedures. The first infection was a limousine driver responsible for transporting international airline crews to and from private hotels.

For ten days after the infections were found, the NSW government refused to institute any measures to curb transmission, except for a slightly-expanded mask mandate. Professor Bill Bowtell and other epidemiologists noted at the time that this was effectively a decision to allow the highly-infectious Delta variant "to run," i.e., spread.

While the initial outbreak was centred in the relatively affluent eastern suburbs, the failure to institute timely lockdown measures meant the virus entered the working-class areas of western and southwestern Sydney, where rates of housing density are far higher, and the proportion of the workforce engaged in frontline occupations, such as factory labour, are far greater.

On June 26, the government instituted supposed citywide "stay at home" orders. But they involved hardly any workplace closures. Most non-essential retail remained open, leading to the measure being widely denounced on social media as a "mockdown."

The first of the emails, cited by the *Sydney Morning Herald*, is from July 13. By that point, the government's actions had already resulted in daily infections that increased from two to eighty-nine in the space of less than a month. The virus was seeded widely in Sydney, including in the working-class suburbs.

On that date, NSW Chief Health Officer Dr Kerry Chant wrote to the state Health Minister Brad Hazzard: "In summary, recommend stage 4 restriction approach outlined in Victoria with the exception of permitting takeaway food." The stage 4 measures would include five-kilometre travel limits, masks in all indoor and outdoor settings, the closure of retail, and an 8 p.m. curfew.

Such "stage 4" measures, first adopted in the neighbouring state of Victoria to end a major outbreak late last year, generally involved significant workplace closures. The policies Chant recommended were not implemented, although some were selectively applied to certain areas of Sydney over the following weeks.

On July 17, NSW Premier Gladys Berejiklian announced heightened restrictions in 12 local government areas (LGAs) in western and southwestern Sydney.

© World Socialist Web Site

Residents of these suburbs were prevented from leaving their homes or suburbs unless they were deemed "authorised workers."

An initial list of "authorised" occupations was dramatically expanded the following day, after joint lobbying from the major corporations and trade unions. The occupations exempted from the order included non-essential retail businesses, transport, virtually all manufacturing, and government employment. Workplace closures were effectively annulled, while the draconian limitations on movement for working-class residents remained.

On July 29, Chant reiterated the call for measures across Sydney in a message to Hazzard, implicitly rebuking the localised measures that Berejiklian had introduced. She advocated the imposition of a citywide nighttime curfew, arguing it was necessary "for the messaging effect as we need to signal the absolute urgency of the current situation."

Beyond the specific issue of a curfew, the efficacy of which epidemiologists have debated, Chant's reference to conveying a sense of "absolute urgency" was at sharp odds with the government, which was continuing to downplay the dangers of the outbreak.

Instead of adopting Chant's recommendations, the government intensified a punitive state response in Sydney's west and southwest. Three hundred army personnel began patrolling the streets and enforcing "compliance," on top of the large police forces in the working-class suburbs and an additional 200 cops who had been deployed in early July.

This police-military mobilisation, involving intimidating door-knocks, a constant helicopter presence and the threat of massive fines and arrests, was widely-opposed. Accompanied by slanderous and false claims that ordinary people were responsible for the spread of the virus, rather than the government, the measures were a frontal assault on the democratic rights of the working class. They served no health purpose, and were not recommended by Chant. Instead, their aim was to intimidate and suppress the mass anger over the criminally-negligent, pro-business pandemic response.

In comments to the WSWS, workers in these areas repeatedly likened the situation to a military occupation. Some noted the trauma of immigrant workers, who were reminded of the authoritarian and dictatorial regimes they had fled.

On August 14, Chant again wrote, requesting that the government "implement consistent measures across greater metropolitan Sydney with outdoor masks, consistent 5km rule and authorised workers only." Instead the government intensified the discrimination against working-class residents, who were also suffering the highest infection and fatality rates. It instituted a 9 p.m. curfew and outdoor mask-mandate, but only in the 12 targeted LGAs.

Undoubtedly, more will emerge. What has already been revealed, however, is a snapshot of the brutal class response of the ruling elite and its governments on every front of the COVID crisis. The NSW government allowed the virus to spread throughout the state, including to far-flung Aboriginal towns that were decimated by the coronavirus, and to Victoria, where over a thousand cases continue to be recorded daily, as well as to New Zealand.

NSW Labor leader Chris Minns proclaimed his "shock" at the emails. That is a sham. Throughout the outbreak, he stressed his commitment to bipartisanship, refraining from even tepid criticism of the government. Minns, moreover, undoubtedly had access to the same information, and knew the government was lying when it claimed to be following the health advice.

While Hazzard remains the health minister, Berejiklian was compelled to resign in late September. She was not removed over her government's criminal actions, which resulted in over 500 deaths and tens of thousands of infections. Instead, a manufactured investigation by the state corruption watchdog was announced into allegations that fell far short of criminal wrongdoing, centred on funding allocations to a regional hospital.

Berejiklian had been associated with the drive by the ruling elite to end lockdowns and had outlined a "roadmap" for lifting safety measures. Sections of the corporate elite, however, were frustrated over the pace of the "reopening."

Berejiklian's successor, Dominic Perrottet, immediately turbo-charged the "roadmap" upon his installation in October and held two UK-style "freedom days." Leaks have indicated that during the height of the outbreak, he opposed even Berejiklian's limited lockdown measures, because of their potential impact on "the economy," i.e., corporate profits.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site