

Omicron detected in Australia as governments reject safety measures

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28 November 2021

Australia has joined a growing list of countries where the presence of the Omicron variant has been confirmed. At least two infections have been detected in Sydney, the most-populous city, and one in the northern city of Darwin. Other possible cases are under investigation. The new strain may be circulating in the community already.

As is the case around the world, the Australian media and political establishment has responded with an immediate rejection of the measures required to prevent the spread of the new variant.

Omicron was first identified in southern Africa last week, where it has driven a surge in infections and accounts for the overwhelming majority of new cases. The World Health Organisation (WHO) deemed it a “variant of concern” on Friday.

Epidemiologists have warned that Omicron’s spread could indicate it is substantially more infectious than Delta, by anything from 100 to 500 percent. Omicron’s 50 mutations, including 32 on the virus’ spike protein, which it uses to bind to human respiratory cells, may render the strain at least partially vaccine-resistant.

While much remains unknown, the emergence of a potentially more deadly variant is an indictment of capitalist governments around the world, including in Australia. By rejecting lockdowns and safety measures as an unacceptable impost on corporate profit, they have not only ensured mass death and illness, but also transformed the world into a petri dish in which the virus is continuously transmitted, making mutations all but inevitable.

Australian governments have allowed two infections of the Delta variant, detected in Sydney in mid-June, to become the country’s worst outbreak, resulting in well over 100,000 infections and more than 1,000 deaths. The outbreak spread across the country and to New Zealand. Over the past two months, Australian governments have explicitly adopted the homicidal “live with the virus”

program, lifting lockdowns and ending virtually all safety measures while Delta is still circulating widely.

Now the same governments are signalling they will permit Omicron to spread. The official response to the new variant is dictated above all by an insistence that nothing be allowed to impede the profit-driven “reopening of the economy.”

Speaking today, Liberal-National Health Minister Greg Hunt indicated that his federal government, together with the state administrations, would not implement new measures to tackle Omicron, aside from a handful of cosmetic policies announced over the weekend.

Hunt touted unsubstantiated suggestions that Omicron may result in less severe symptoms than previous iterations of the virus. He presented inoculation rates as proof that the country was “ready” for the new variant. Together with the Chief Medical Officer Paul Kelly, Hunt asserted that Omicron was likely not vaccine-resistant.

Kelly, while insisting that all would be well, noted: “Some reports out of South Africa are that it’s mostly mild. Other information we have is that hospitalisation rates are increasing. So, we need to get further information there, and we are getting that information.”

As justification for doing nothing, Prime Minister Scott Morrison invoked the fact that the characteristics of the virus are not fully known. This is an open rejection of the precautionary principle that is supposed to govern public health.

Kelly all but admitted that the government’s intention is to allow Omicron to spread. A reporter asked about the possible positive outcome of mass infection in conceivably boosting natural immunity. Kelly said he would consider that scenario, that is, of exposing masses of people to a potentially-deadly disease, to be a “Christmas present.”

While admitting there were too few cases to ascertain the lethality of Omicron, former deputy chief medical

officer Nick Coatsworth went one step further. He declared that “if this is milder than Delta you actually want it to spread within your community... to become the pro-dominant circulating virus.”

In line with this “herd immunity” program, Australian governments did nothing for days after South African authorities reported the detection of Omicron to the WHO. Only on late Saturday afternoon did the federal government impose a travel ban on anyone who had been in southern Africa in the previous fortnight. By that point, however, the variant was already confirmed to be present in a number of European countries that have virtually unrestricted travel to and from Australia.

Two confirmed infections were on board a flight that arrived in Sydney from Doha on Saturday night. These cases again highlighted the refusal of Australian governments to develop purpose-built quarantines.

Reportedly, the two infected travellers, and 14 other passengers, have been sent to “Special Health Accommodation.” But the facilities that operate under that title are not medical centres, hospitals or scientifically-designed quarantines. From the little that has been made public by the New South Wales (NSW) government, the accommodation includes apartment blocks near the centre of Sydney, as well as private hotels, which have been responsible for the vast majority of community outbreaks in Australia since the pandemic began.

Delta has repeatedly spread in the private hotels. If Omicron is more infectious than Delta, as experts have warned, the hotels will all but guarantee widespread airborne transmission.

The resumption of travel has been a central component of the reopening drive. The lifting of travel restrictions, and flights into Victoria and NSW, without any requirement for isolation for doubly-vaccinated passengers, was announced earlier this month by Alan Joyce, CEO of Qantas, the country’s largest airline, alongside Morrison and NSW Premier Dominic Perrottet.

As a result, dozens of people from countries where Omicron was present have been in the community. Reporter Mary Lloyd tweeted yesterday: “Just had a call from @NSWHealth. They think about 80 people arrived in NSW from #SouthAfrica in the past 6 weeks. There were at least 20 people on my flight and several flights a week.”

NSW Health Minister Brad Hazzard responded by blandly stating that Omicron was likely already transmitting in Sydney before the arrival of the infected passengers on Saturday.

The border between NSW and Victoria, the two most-infected states, is also fully open. It has already emerged that one individual who arrived in Sydney from southern Africa then travelled to Melbourne on November 25. She tested positive for COVID on her return to Sydney, with genomic sequencing underway to determine whether it is the Omicron variant.

While travel has been banned from southern Africa, the national border otherwise remains open. Arrivals to NSW and Victoria must now self-isolate for 72 hours. This is an entirely token restriction, given that the incubation period for the virus is up to two weeks.

A meeting of the “National Cabinet,” composed of the federal, state and territory government leaders, the majority of them from the Labor Party, is scheduled for later today or tomorrow. It is slated to discuss the response to Omicron, but all the official parties have already nailed their colours to the mast.

The Victorian Labor government, which has spearheaded the reopening over recent weeks, has not announced any mitigation against Omicron, except for the 72-hour isolation requirement. Federal Labor representatives, including party leader Anthony Albanese, called for the southern African travel ban, but outlined no other policies. Together with the Liberal-Nationals, they insisted that the reopening must proceed.

The political establishment is faithfully implementing the homicidal program demanded by the corporations and banks. Business Council of Australia chief executive Jennifer Westacott declared this morning: “The worst thing we can do is stall the economic momentum.”

The Murdoch-owned *Australian* published a prominent editorial, declaring “an over-reaction to the new variant such as shutting Australia off from the world, and state from state, would be economically destructive.”

The new variant is again demonstrating that the fight to end the pandemic is a struggle not only against a virus, but a social and political order that prioritises the profits and wealth of a tiny corporate oligarchy above all else. The defence of health and lives requires a fight for the abolition of capitalism and the establishment of socialism.



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