

Labor Party enforcing Australian ruling elite's criminal response to Omicron variant

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Since the new Omicron variant of COVID was detected in southern Africa late last month, the Australian ruling elite and its political representatives have staked out one of the most irresponsible positions internationally.

Governments have made no pretence of seeking to prevent the more infectious variant from entering the country, even as epidemiologists warn that it may resist existing vaccines or severely impact on their efficacy. As a consequence, community transmission is underway in the working-class suburbs of southwestern Sydney, and widespread exposures among returned travellers means Omicron is likely in other states as well.

Australian governments always rejected a scientifically-grounded strategy to eliminate the virus on the grounds it was “too costly.” Through much of the pandemic, however, they pursued a “strong suppression” response, including some lockdowns imposed under popular pressure, which repeatedly ended community transmission.

This has all changed. In July-August, the “National Cabinet” adopted a “roadmap” to force the population to “live with” the virus so that full corporate profit-making could resume. Since then, lockdowns have ended in New South Wales (NSW) and Victoria amid widespread Delta transmission, the international borders have reopened and interstate travel is resuming.

Now, with the emergence of Omicron, the political establishment has openly come out in favour of the “herd immunity” program that laid waste to Britain, the US and elsewhere. Some representatives declare that the spread of Omicron could even be beneficial, because of sketchy and unsubstantiated press reports asserting that it “may be” less lethal than Delta.

The Labor Party has played the pivotal role in this shift. Labor state and territory premiers constitute a majority in the National Cabinet, an extra-constitutional body that has governed by decree through much of the pandemic. They signed off on the reopening plan. And they endorsed a statement last week, declaring there “was no immediate need to change current settings” in response to Omicron, with the

aim being “to limit the rate of Omicron incursions into Australia, rather than eliminate it at the border.”

Daniel Andrews, Labor premier of Victoria, is positioning himself as the political leader who is most aggressively committed to allowing the virus to spread and forcing the population to accept illness and death.

In an interview broadcast on Sunday by the “Socially Democratic” podcast, Andrews declared: “We will not be pursuing an Omicron zero [policy] here. We don’t think that makes any sense. It might already be here. The good news so far is that whilst it might be more infectious, the evidence suggests that it might be milder.”

The statement can be described only as politically criminal. Andrews insisted that nothing would be done to stop the spread of a new variant that has greatly alarmed medical experts, because his government’s previous policies, including resuming international travel and fully reopening the border with NSW had likely already allowed it into Victoria.

Andrews, moreover, is spreading medical disinformation. There is no conclusive evidence whatsoever that Omicron is “milder.” Hospitalisation rates have soared in Gauteng Province, South Africa’s Omicron epicentre, with children under two accounting for 10 percent of new admissions.

Dr Rudo Mathivha, head of Intensive Care at Chris Hani Baragwanath hospital in Johannesburg, told the international media this week that groups of five to ten children were frequently being admitted together, with “moderate to severe” symptoms. In one case, a 15-year-old boy with no underlying medical conditions tragically died. In another, a healthy 17-year-old has been placed on a ventilator.

Andrews said he had been “texting back and forth” with right-wing Liberal-National NSW Premier Dominic Perrottet on Saturday. They had resolved to “keep our rules the same,” i.e., to proceed with the breakneck lifting of the few safety restrictions that remain, while allowing unfettered travel between the states. Andrews and Perrottet were making their backroom, extra-parliamentary policy decisions a day after the first case of Omicron community

transmission was confirmed in NSW.

That first infection of a pupil at Regents Park Christian School in southwestern Sydney has now been linked to a cluster of at least 19 cases. Today, NSW Health claimed the cluster had been traced to a traveller who returned from Nigeria on November 23. At that point, there were no quarantine requirements for international arrivals. If NSW Health is correct, the virus has been circulating in Sydney for a fortnight. Passengers on multiple flights with confirmed cases onboard have not been quarantined also, so there are potentially many chains of transmission.

The immediate public health response should have been to shut the border between NSW and Victoria to ensure the virus did not spread from the largest to the second largest state. Instead Andrews and Perrottet have conspired to ensure Omicron is circulating in jurisdictions accounting for 60 percent of Australia's 25 million population.

The critical issue, Andrews declared, was: "Our borders remain open." He said: "That's very important, not just for the people of Victoria... but if Victoria and NSW are working closely together I reckon that is pretty good for the rest of the country as well."

This is the line of the major airlines such as Qantas and other sections of the corporate elite demanding a bonanza over the holiday season, whatever the health consequences. When the National Cabinet met last week and rejected any additional measures in response to Omicron, its members were shown a list of the commercial flights that would be disrupted by border restrictions.

Mehring Books, the publishing arm of the Socialist Equality Party (US), is proud to announce the publication of Volume 1 of *COVID, Capitalism, and Class War: A Social and Political Chronology of the Pandemic*, a compilation of the *World Socialist Web Site's* coverage of this global crisis.

Andrews' close collaboration with Perrottet is notable. The NSW premier was installed after his predecessor, Gladys Berejiklian, was ousted in a manufactured corruption scandal in September. Perrottet was brought to the fore to hasten the "reopening of the economy" and the associated pro-business restructuring. An extreme right-winger and free-marketeer, as treasurer he railed against any social welfare and reportedly opposed even the limited pandemic restrictions imposed by Berejiklian after a Delta outbreak began in June.

In July, after the virus spread to Victoria, Andrews announced border restrictions and a limited lockdown. In a July 15 statement, he declared: "We now have new cases, new exposure sites and a strain of this virus that is wildly infectious... Victoria will not wait to act. We know that not much good comes from waiting. Waiting could see more people infected and the number of exposure sites explode."

The health measures previously instituted in Victoria were always implemented under intense pressure from educators, health staff and other sections of the working class. They were also motivated by fears that the chronically-underfunded hospital system would collapse in even a limited outbreak, and included a myriad of business and workplace exemptions aimed at protecting corporate profit.

Andrews' July statement is nevertheless an indictment of everything his government has done since. This includes lifting a lockdown and most other safety measures amid a thousand or more Delta infections a day, and forcing a full resumption of in-person teaching, which has resulted in the virus circulating in almost 800 schools.

All the governments are pressing ahead, whatever the consequences. On December 15, the handful of remaining COVID restrictions in NSW, including density caps on indoor venues, mask-mandates and QR check-in codes, are to be lifted, just as Omicron begins to circulate. The same measure is planned for Victoria sometime this month, with Andrews proclaiming that the Boxing Day cricket match will be attended by 100,000 or more spectators. And the Queensland Labor government is reopening its border next week, ensuring that Omicron will enter that state too.

There is widespread anger and opposition in the working class to this homicidal agenda, and the assault on jobs, wages and living standards accompanying it.

Today, tens of thousands of schoolteachers in NSW are holding their first 24-hour strike in a decade, opposing unbearable workloads and stagnant pay.

In a statement yesterday, the Committee for Public Education explained that these emerging industrial disputes must take up the fight to eliminate the virus, including by forcing a shutdown of schools where COVID is present in the community. This struggle can go forward only through a rebellion against Labor and its associated trade unions, which are intent on forcing the population to "live with" and die with a deadly virus, all in the interests of corporate profit.



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