

Australian governments create conditions for a huge surge of COVID infections

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10 December 2021

Australian governments, state and federal, Labor Party and Liberal-National Coalition alike, have created a perfect storm for a major upturn of the pandemic. Already, their lifting of limited lockdowns and most other restrictions has resulted in resurging infections, continuing daily deaths and the spread of the highly-infectious and potentially vaccine-resistant Omicron variant.

The official response is to double down. Remaining safety measures are being lifted, the domestic borders fully reopened and super-spreader events encouraged. The maxim is that nothing must interfere with the corporate bonanza being prepared over the holiday season, and the broader drive to force the population to “live with the virus” in the interests of big business.

This homicidal “let it rip” program is totally bipartisan. It is being devised by the extra-constitutional “National Cabinet,” composed of the federal, state and territory leaders, mostly from the Labor Party. It is being spearheaded by a de facto tripartite alliance of Prime Minister Scott Morrison, Victorian Labor Premier Daniel Andrews and New South Wales (NSW) Coalition Premier Dominic Perrottet.

When Omicron was first detected late last month, they all insisted that no safety measures would be instituted to prevent the variant’s entry into the country. As a consequence, it is now circulating. There are already 45 Omicron infections in NSW, with clusters of community transmission linked to two western Sydney schools and an indoor rock-climbing facility.

Yesterday, Victorian authorities confirmed the state’s first two locally-acquired Omicron infections, one in the western Melbourne municipality of Brimbank, the other in the southeastern municipality of Casey. There is no indication of how the infected individuals contracted the virus, on opposite sides of the state capital, meaning there is likely broader transmission.

The notification of the cases came less than a week after Premier Andrews rejected a “zero Omicron” strategy, and said his government’s main priority was to keep state borders open for commercial reasons.

A community case of Omicron has been detected in the Australian Capital Territory, while there are quarantined infections in the Northern Territory and Queensland.

To justify their stand, the governments have touted entirely unsubstantiated claims that Omicron may be less lethal than other variants. Some officials even proclaimed their desire for Omicron to spread, on the twisted argument that its mass transmission would displace Delta.

Wednesday’s announcement by Pfizer that two doses of its vaccine will not protect against Omicron infection highlights the criminality of this policy. Pfizer and AstraZeneca have formed the bedrock of Australia’s inoculation program. The rollout of a booster shot, which Pfizer says may improve the efficacy of the vaccine against Omicron, has only just begun. Little over 2 percent of the population have had the third shot.

As Omicron is circulating, Delta is resurging. This is especially so in NSW, where infections have roughly doubled in the space of a week. On Monday, 208 infections were announced, down a little more than 50 compared with the previous day. Then on Tuesday the figure was 260, Wednesday 403, Thursday 420, Friday 516 and today 560.

The NSW infections are higher than they have been for the past two months. The reproduction number of the virus is 1.32, is the greatest since August. Any figure above 1 means that infections will grow. The positivity rate, indicating the number of test results confirming infection, was 0.57 percent yesterday, the highest since October 11.

It is exactly two months since a limited lockdown was lifted in NSW, followed by the ending of a host of other restrictions. The current increase is the direct product of

these government policies, fully supported by the state Labor opposition.

A number of super-spreading events have been identified. They include a trivia night at the Oxford Hotel in Sydney's inner-west, which has resulted in 45 Delta infections. The event was held on November 30, but health authorities only publicly warned that it was a source of transmission more than a week later. For months, NSW Health has not published data on COVID exposure sites in Sydney.

A boat dance party in Sydney Harbour on December 3 has resulted in at least eight Omicron cases. Nightclubs and pubs in the city centre, the eastern suburbs and the west also have been linked to transmissions.

NSW Health has warned people to be "cautious." But those attending large social gatherings are following government exhortations to "enjoy summer" and treat the pandemic as a thing of the past. Premier Perrottet responded to the Harbour Omicron cluster by calling for "confidence, hope and optimism."

Perrottet's government is going ahead with a UK-style "freedom day" this Wednesday. Masks will no longer be required in most settings and all density caps for pubs, clubs and sporting events will be lifted. Restrictions will no longer apply to the unvaccinated, forcing hospitality and other workers to interact in high-risk settings with people who have no protection against transmitting the virus.

The QR check-in code system is being abolished for most venues. This effectively marks an end to contact-tracing, with the government dropping one of the last means of identifying where and when the virus has been transmitted. This is particularly significant, given that the various pseudo-scientific models used by the "National Cabinet" to justify the reopening have all assumed an effective tracing and quarantining system.

In a rare exception to the generally uncritical media coverage of these criminal policies, the *Guardian* featured warnings by World Health Organisation advisor Professor Mary-Louise McLaws.

"It's definitely unwise to push ahead with the relaxations," McLaws warned. "It is so much easier to ask Australians to continue wearing a mask and to wait until we know more about Omicron, and for those who are not yet fully vaccinated to wear a mask until we know more. It's too cavalier to throw away these really successful infection prevention strategies."

In Victoria, daily new infections have returned to around 1,200. Thirteen deaths were confirmed yesterday,

adding to continuous daily tolls. Testing times are blowing out. COVID hospitalisations had stabilised at around 300, but have not declined since. There are more than 60 people in intensive care units, with senior doctors warning of the intense strain on the system.

Chronically-underfunded, public hospitals are running at capacity, even in states that have not yet seen substantial COVID admissions. The *Australian* reported today that there were 19 "code yellow" alarms at Queensland hospitals last month, signalling that demand exceeded capacity. The Australian Medical Association warned that the state requires an additional 1,500 hospital beds immediately.

Despite this, the Queensland Labor government is proceeding with the opening of its state borders this week, effectively allowing Delta and Omicron to enter without any boost to healthcare.

This is the national policy. The "National Cabinet" yesterday reiterated the commitment of all the governments to end restrictions. It "noted the significant progress in reopening Australia" and hailed the lifting of state and international travel bans.

The meeting "received an update on progress being made by all states and territories on enhancing health system capacity planning... and potential surge responses." But no details were provided. Australia began the pandemic with fewer hospital beds per capita than most other OECD countries, and the number of intensive care unit beds has actually decreased over the past two years.

These governments are pursuing policies that they know will result in major surges of infections, hospitalisations and deaths. The alternative to this policy, which is dictated by the profit demands of the corporate elite, is the fight to mobilise the working class on a socialist program that places public health, safety and the interests of society above those of a tiny wealthy oligarchy.



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