

# COVID catastrophe looms as Australian governments lift restrictions

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Backed by a wall-to-wall media barrage exhorting people to travel and celebrate “the festive season,” Australian governments are letting loose the highly-transmissible Omicron variant across the country, exposing millions to the danger of serious COVID-19 infection.

Labor and Liberal-National Coalition alike, the federal, state and territory governments are lifting most of the remaining limited safety restrictions and opening international and domestic borders, creating the conditions for a catastrophe.

That is despite the “reopening” drive already causing surges of both the Delta and Omicron mutants, and warnings by health experts and government health officials that huge numbers of cases are “inevitable” as a result.

Such is the political criminality that governments are insisting that Omicron is “mild” and “good news,” regardless of the exponential spread of the variant in the UK, South Africa and Denmark, and scientific studies showing that two doses of the existing vaccines offer zero or little protection against Omicron.

There are banner tabloid newspaper headlines such as “We are one and free,” “Shoppers to ditch masks” and even “Get COVID, no worries.” These are part of a saturation misinformation campaign that will send the effectively unvaccinated population into peril.

The lies told by governments over the past two years—from Prime Minister Scott Morrison’s advice to “go to the footy” to “it’s not a race” to vaccinate, and “children don’t get infected”—are being taken to a new level of mendacity.

Federal Health Minister Greg Hunt yesterday defied the scientific evidence to declare that “all of our vaccines provide strong, clear protection against serious illness, hospitalisation and loss of life” and Omicron could be “a quiet positive development for the world.”

The already unsafe reopening “roadmap” set months ago by the bipartisan “National Cabinet” of government leaders is being accelerated, even though the term “fully vaccinated” has been rendered meaningless.

According to the medical evidence, even three doses of the

current vaccines will provide only about 75 percent protection from Omicron. But less than 3 percent of the population has received three jabs. And the federal government is delaying the “boosters” until five months after people received their second doses. That means millions will be unprotected throughout the holiday season.

Morrison’s Liberal-National Coalition government will tomorrow also end a two-week “pause” on an influx of overseas workers and international students, and open travel “bubbles” with Singapore and South Korea. For all Morrison’s false assurances that Omicron is “no longer a concern,” this decision is driven by the ruthless demands of big business for access to cheap labour and for full profit-making.

Business Council of Australia chief executive Jennifer Westacott welcomed the move, speaking on behalf on the largest companies operating in the country. She said it was “a critical step to tearing down the fortress Australia mentality that kept us safe during the pandemic but puts a handbrake on our recovery...”

“Crucially, this will help fill the shortfall of over half a million workers that has seen some businesses struggling to keep their doors open and makes it hard to get new projects started.” She insisted: “To build on our momentum, every state and territory should now be acting to restore peoples’ freedoms, reopen safely and get on with the recovery.”

Every government is rushing to heed this message, which nakedly prioritises profits over health and lives. Not least, the Labor Party governments in Victoria, Queensland, Western Australia and the Northern Territory have all “reopened” or set dates to do so.

Leading the pack for now, the Coalition government in New South Wales (NSW), the most populous state, will axe practically all safety precautions tomorrow, even for totally unvaccinated people, allowing everyone to return to non-essential retail businesses, hospitality venues and gyms.

Venue capacity limits will be abolished entirely. QR check-ins will be mandatory only in select spaces, such as hospitals, gyms, pubs and clubs and places of worship. Face

masks will no longer be required in many settings.

Some idea of the impending disaster is given by today's statistics. NSW Health reported 804 new cases. That is six times the 135 daily infections announced on November 1, when the impact of the "live with the virus" measures first began to be felt. The hospitalisation rate has begun to rise also, including one confirmed Omicron case.

There are now 85 Omicron cases officially recorded in NSW—up by 21 in a day. NSW Health expects further Omicron cases to be identified in the coming days as genomic testing results are confirmed.

NSW authorities revealed that more than 1.9 million coronavirus case alerts, asking people to test and isolate, had been issued via the Service NSW app over the previous fortnight. That is the result of "super-spreader" social events, as well as school and workplace infections.

How quickly clusters can explode was shown on Monday, when the number of cases linked to an outbreak at the Argyle House nightclub in Newcastle, 160 kilometres north of Sydney, spiked from 24 to 84 overnight, then rose to 150 today. "A number of these cases are likely to be the Omicron variant," NSW Health said.

Four people who partied at the club last Wednesday had infections stemming from a Sydney harbour cruise of 140 people on December 3, which has set off a string of infections at other venues across Sydney and Newcastle.

Wider spread is certain. All 680 people who checked into the Argyle House venue using a QR code, from 9pm on December 8 to 3am on December 9 have been assessed as close contacts.

This is just the tip of the iceberg, with infections in working class areas, especially in schools and workplaces, largely being buried by the media.

University of South Australia biostatistics professor Adrian Esterman yesterday warned that the reproduction rate of the virus in NSW was at its highest in four months: 1.43, meaning every 100 new cases infect about 143 others.

While desperately trying to blindfold the public, Governments are defying clearly growing opposition, including among parents who have been told to keep their children at schools even though most have not been vaccinated at all.

One indication of this came when Sydney Catholic Schools confirmed that about half of its 150 schools moved to remote learning last Wednesday. Principals, teachers and parents decided to stop exposing children to the heightened risk of infection on the eve of school holidays.

The reprehensible character of the ruling class response is underscored by events such as students from an entire school in Willunga, south of Adelaide, having to isolate after being exposed to infection at a school assembly, and an outbreak

spreading in the Northern Territory town of Katherine and nearby remote indigenous communities.

Another stark indictment is the continuing COVID outbreak in Victoria, where the state Labor Premier Daniel Andrews a week ago rejected a "zero-Omicron" strategy. Today, Victoria recorded yet another day of more than 1,000 new infections. It had 1,189 new COVID-19 cases and six deaths, with 360 infected patients in hospitals and the seven-day average for hospitalisations continuing to climb.

There are now 11,051 active cases of the virus in Victoria, and 605 people have died during the current outbreak. Yet the Labor government yesterday underscored its total commitment to the corporate agenda by insisting that schools must remain open despite infections and dropping 14-day hotel quarantine requirements for double-vaccinated travellers from Omicron-plagued southern Africa, who will be allowed to "self-quarantine" for 72 hours.

Another Labor government, in Queensland, opened its borders to NSW and Victoria, despite its own Chief Health Officer, John Gerrard, saying it was "inevitable" that COVID-19 cases would surge in the state within weeks as a result, possibly to "more than hundreds."

At the behest of the corporate elite, all these governments are imposing policies that they know, only too well, will cause mass infections, hospitalisations and deaths. That underscores the necessity for the Global Workers' Inquest into the COVID-19 Pandemic and the fight to mobilise the working class on a socialist program that places public health, safety and social needs above the private profit interests of the super-rich.



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