

Australian governments ramp up “reopening drive” amid record COVID-19 infections

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With the rapid spread of the highly-infectious Omicron variant, Australian governments and health authorities are proceeding to scrap all remaining public health measures, in line with the requirements of big business.

Australia-wide, today’s total of more than 4,000 new COVID-19 cases is a record high, and the fourth straight day of unprecedented infections. While New South Wales (NSW) and Victoria, the two most populous states, account for the vast majority, new infections were reported across the country.

Amid this accelerating disaster, both the Labor government in Victoria and the Liberal-National government in NSW went even further in dropping protective measures. From Tuesday, they will do away with the requirement for international travellers to self-isolate for 72 hours upon arrival. Overseas arrivals will only have to isolate until they receive a negative result from a PCR test conducted in Australia.

Even more politically criminal was today’s announcement by NSW Health that although most cases in the state are now likely to be Omicron, it will now “only undertake genomic sequencing for the Omicron variant in the circumstances where it will make a clinical difference to the care of a patient.”

This is a brazen bid to hide the truth from ordinary people and cover up essential public health information. It will also deny the global scientific community access to valuable data about the infectiousness and severity of Omicron.

There are signs of mounting public concern and hostility to the scrapping of even limited mitigation measures. A change.org petition entitled “Reinstate QR codes, mandatory masks and capacity limits in NSW” has collected more than 11,000 signatures since it was created late Thursday night.

Also indicative of how seriously the public takes the COVID-19 threat is the substantially increased demand for PCR tests. In NSW, 765,000 tests were reported in the past seven days, 43 percent higher than the previous week.

This increase has taken place despite changes to NSW contact tracing rules that mean “casual contacts” are not required, or even asked, to get tested unless they develop symptoms.

In addition, “close contacts” have been redefined to “focus specifically on people who live with someone” who has tested positive for COVID. NSW Premier Dominic Perrottet has said these changes are designed to “make sure we reduce the definition or capture of those people as close contacts.”

Together with the abolition of QR-code sign-in requirements at most venues, this is intended to drive down reported case numbers and conceal the true extent of the pandemic.

In NSW, 2,482 new COVID-19 infections were reported today, the highest number recorded in a single day in any state throughout the pandemic. There are now 12,051 active cases in the state, the highest figure since September 24.

Of the cases reported today in NSW, 899—more than a third—were recorded in the Hunter New England Local Health District, which includes the industrial port city of Newcastle. Almost half the cases confirmed in that region since the beginning of the pandemic were recorded in the past two days alone.

NSW Health urged “the local Newcastle community to seriously consider deferring any social events in Newcastle until after Christmas.” But this massive surge in cases, in a regional area lacking adequate health resources, has not prompted any reversal of the reopening drive.

Australia's Chief Medical Officer Paul Kelly ended a press conference yesterday with a clear statement that, when it comes to protecting their health and lives, people are on their own. He said: "[P]eople should go about their lives, work through their own plan for living with COVID. Wear a mask if you feel that that makes you feel more safe, particularly indoors."

NSW Health Minister Brad Hazzard claimed on Wednesday that the state's hospitals were "well-equipped" to deal with a surge in infections, which he acknowledged could be as high as 25,000 per day by next month. However, an email sent to senior NSW Health staff and cited in the *Sydney Morning Herald* said the state's health authorities had "concerns with increasing levels of transmission in the community and the impact of furloughing staff."

Since Thursday evening, NSW hospitals have been at "red alert level," meaning exemptions will be required to visit patients. According to NSW government figures, 459 health workers were in isolation due to COVID-19 exposure on December 13, up from 231 the previous week.

Despite government and media claims that Omicron is "milder" than the Delta mutation, hospitalisations already are starting to rise. Across NSW, 206 people are hospitalised with COVID-19, up from 150 a week ago. Of these, 26 are in intensive care units (ICU) and 9 require ventilation. Six deaths have been recorded this week.

In Victoria, 1,504 new cases were reported today, up from 778 a month ago. The total of 9,589 in the past seven days is 17 percent higher than the previous week. Infections in that state are still primarily the result of a continuing Delta outbreak, but at least 29 Omicron cases have been confirmed.

Due to the "live with the virus" drive by the corporate elite and its governments, states that had largely suppressed the virus previously are being increasingly exposed. Since the Queensland Labor government reopened its state borders to domestic travel on Monday, 90 new infections have been recorded, including 12 Omicron cases. In South Australia, 73 new cases were announced today, the state's highest toll since the pandemic began.

Vaccinations are proving no protection. Many of the NSW cases are linked to "super-spreader" events that were only open to patrons who had received two

vaccine doses. A vaccine-only strategy cannot possibly eliminate the pandemic. This underscores the criminal nature of the bipartisan reopening drive, based on the lie that "fully vaccinated" people are safe.

Despite the evident dangers, the five-month wait after their second dose before people are eligible to receive a booster shot has not been reduced. As a result, and with the removal of nearly all other mitigations, millions of people will remain unprotected against Omicron for several months.

Moreover, a new study by the Imperial College in London found "no evidence of Omicron having lower severity than Delta, judged by either the proportion of people testing positive who report symptoms, or by the proportion of cases seeking hospital care after infection."

The development of the Omicron variant is a result of the failure of global capitalism to eliminate the pandemic. Instead, "herd immunity" policies, of the kind now more openly being adopted by the Australian ruling elite, have created the conditions for the evolution of new, more dangerous strains.

This growing catastrophe will last as long as public health measures are determined by the profit demands of big business, that is, until the working class takes matters into its own hands.



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