

# Australian governments double down on “reopening” as COVID-19 cases surge

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As COVID-19 infections mount and the Omicron variant spreads across the country, Australian governments continue to insist that the reopening drive must continue. They are also defying growing statements of alarm, and in some cases, outright opposition, by doctors and public health experts, including Sydney immunologist Dr Dan Suan.

An emergency “National Cabinet” meeting of the federal, state and territory government leaders has been called for tomorrow in response to the rise of Omicron, which now accounts for at least 40 percent of samples tested in Australia. Prime Minister Scott Morrison, however, was quick to stress that this would be an “informal” meeting and lockdowns were not on the agenda.

Morrison, who heads the Liberal-National Coalition, said this morning, “we’re not going back to lockdowns, we’re not going back to shutting down people’s lives—we’re going forward to live with this virus with common sense and responsibility.”

New South Wales (NSW), the most populous state, posted a record-high COVID-19 infection number today, with 3,057 new cases, a 22 percent increase over yesterday’s total. This is the sixth-straight day on which the state has reported a daily figure higher than any before December. The state has recorded a total of 15,825 cases in the past seven days.

While state Liberal-National Premier Dominic Perrottet maintained that hospitalisation and intensive care unit (ICU) admission are the “key metrics” to watch, not infections, the inevitable relationship between these figures is beginning to emerge.

According to the official tally, 284 people are hospitalised with COVID, 116 more than a week ago. New ICU admissions in the past two days have been 11, for a total of 39. Two deaths were reported this morning, making a total of five over the past week.

In fact, the hospitalisation numbers hide the reality. According to NSW Health’s Critical Intelligence Unit, 3,342 COVID-19 patients were being cared for “outside of a hospital setting” on December 13, an increase of almost 1,000 over the previous week. More recent figures have not been released. This number has almost certainly skyrocketed over the past week.

As infections, severe illness and deaths mount, Perrottet demands that NSW residents “need to learn to live alongside” the virus.

Writing in the *Daily Telegraph* yesterday, the premier claimed: “Vaccination offers a level of protection that, previously, we could only get by staying home. The best advice indicates that a booster dose will provide even better protection, so we should all go and get that too, as soon as we’re eligible.”

In view of studies showing that the Astra Zeneca vaccine provides almost no protection against Omicron, now the dominant strain in NSW, and Pfizer is little better, this is a dangerous lie.

State Labor Party opposition leader Chris Minns on Sunday pledged “bipartisan support” for the Perrottet government’s handling of pandemic.

Neighbouring Victoria reported 1,245 new infections today, bringing total active cases in the state to 13,355. Six Victorians died from COVID-19 yesterday, for a total of 36 in the past week.

The ongoing COVID-19 wave in Victoria has already created a crisis for the state’s ambulance service. Paramedics are reporting periods in which dozens of patients need assistance but no one is available to respond. This resulted last Wednesday night in the death of a patient, who waited more than 40 minutes for an ambulance after suffering a cardiac arrest.

According to the *Herald Sun*, “much of Melbourne’s inner west was left without Mobile Intensive Care Ambulance coverage on Friday and Saturday night.”

This is the responsibility of the state's Labor government, which has run down the public hospital system, as has every other government.

South Australia reported 154 new COVID-19 cases today, following 105 yesterday, which was the first time the state had recorded more than 100 infections in one day during the pandemic.

The unprecedented surge is a direct product of a profit-driven decision to open the borders to NSW and Victoria. Although there were more than 12,000 active cases in those neighbouring states at the time, the state Liberal government ditched domestic quarantine requirements on the phony basis that South Australia's adult vaccination rate, then 70 percent, would prevent a severe outbreak.

Since border restrictions were dropped on November 23, the state has reported 632 cases—more than a third of the total recorded since the beginning of the pandemic.

State Premier Steven Marshall echoed the deceptive claims of Perrottet and Morrison that infection numbers are irrelevant, stating “we're most concerned about anybody that needs to go to hospital.”

As of yesterday, only six South Australians were hospitalised with COVID-19, but with 380 infections occurring in the past week, this number is set to increase.

In a clear sign that the South Australian population is concerned about the escalating case numbers, the demand for testing has soared. The *Advertiser* reported that residents had queued for as long as nine hours overnight at one of Adelaide's two 24-hour drive-through test sites.

The state's Chief Public Health Officer, Nicola Spurrier, claimed the long queues were the result of a lack of migrant workers to staff the sites. She said: “There's a shortage of people across the board because our international borders have been shut.”

In other words, years of attacks on public health have produced wages and conditions so poor that the system cannot function without a steady supply of cheap labour from overseas.

Marshall announced this morning that visitors will no longer be required to take a COVID-19 test upon entering the state.

Queensland reported 86 new COVID-19 cases today, the highest-ever daily total in that state. Since the state Labor government eased border restrictions on December 13, the state has recorded 270 new cases, more than ten times the 26 recorded in the previous eight-day period.

At least 15 cases have been linked to an “Omicron cluster of concern” involving 2,675 people who attended a Griffith University graduation ceremony in Brisbane on

December 13.

Premier Annastacia Palaszczuk said the uptick in cases was “exactly what we expected.” Her government Chief Health Officer John Gerrard openly stated a “herd immunity” policy. He declared: “Omicron is clearly becoming dominant in Queensland. This virus ultimately needs to become endemic in the community. Eventually all of us will develop some degree of immunity to this virus.”

Today, the Palaszczuk government announced an easing of quarantine and testing requirements for close and casual contacts of people with COVID-19. Vaccinated close contacts will be required to quarantine for just one week, rather than two. “Low risk” casual contacts will no longer be required to take a COVID-19 test.

These changes are designed to minimise the number of cases identified, in order to boost spending over the Christmas period.

There are currently 87 active COVID-19 cases in the Northern Territory, the highest number since the start of the pandemic, yet the territory's Labor government yesterday removed the requirement for vaccinated travellers to quarantine upon entry.

Among the mounting medical voices of opposition, University of South Australia epidemiologist Professor Adrian Esterman said it was like “Alice in Wonderland” that governments were scrapping health protections as the pandemic worsened.

Nevertheless, Australia's state and federal governments, Labor and Liberal-National alike, are in lockstep. Far from protecting human health and lives as infection numbers rise, they are abandoning public health mitigation measures in line with the demands of big business.

This mercenary policy, which echoes that of governments internationally, demonstrates why the *World Socialist Web Site* has launched the Global Workers' Inquest into the COVID-19 Pandemic. This is part of the fight throughout the working class for a socialist program that places public health, safety and society's interests above the profit dictates of the wealthy elites.



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