

Outrage grows as Australia's "National Cabinet" scraps basic protections against mass COVID infections

Mike Head
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Disgust, alarm and fury is mounting among health professionals and throughout the population as Australia's federal and state governments, both Liberal-National and Labor Party, rush to dismantle essential COVID-19 safety measures as the pandemic spirals to levels that far surpass anything experienced before in this country.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison called an emergency meeting of the bipartisan "National Cabinet" of federal, state and territory leaders today, supposedly to respond to the catastrophe. Far from taking steps to avert the disaster, the meeting moved to further slash testing, tracing and isolation measures, in particular to ensure that workers are kept on the job, even if infected.

It is now obvious that the more disastrous the pandemic becomes—due to the past failures of these same governments and their global counterparts—the faster they move to scrap basic protections against mass infections, hospitalisations and deaths, in order to satisfy the profit demands of big business.

Although the rapidly rising record numbers of infections are not yet at the calamitous levels seen across the United States and Europe, they are heading in the same direction, as is the criminally irresponsible response of the political establishment.

Having just exceeded 10,000 daily new infections for the first time during the Christmas long weekend, Australia today already officially recorded more than 20,000, despite sharp drops in testing. That rapid doubling underscores the exponential surge underway, with the highly-transmissible Omicron mutation combining with the previous deadly Delta variant.

This, and the reaction of governments, has come as a particular shock in Australia, previously held up as an exceptional pandemic success story. The country's first COVID-19 wave peaked at about 450 daily cases in March 2020, the second wave at just over 740 in July–August 2020, and the third (Delta) wave at around 2,700 this October.

In each previous surge, confronted by working class opposition, governments introduced limited lockdowns that, while inadequate, did stem the outbreaks. Since October, however, the ruling elite has effectively adopted the homicidal

"herd immunity" policy of compelling people to "live with" the contagion.

At present, New South Wales (NSW), the most populous state, remains the epicentre of the disaster, with 12,226 new cases confirmed today. Hospitalisations, which jumped by 121 overnight to 746, have more than doubled in a week. Neighbouring Victoria is catching up, leaping to 5,137 infections and 13 deaths. Cases are soaring above 2,000 daily in Queensland and over 1,300 in South Australia, which had each largely suppressed the virus until their governments joined the wholesale lifting of safety restrictions this month.

These figures badly under-estimate the true level of infection. Health experts have taken to social media to warn that this is just "the tip of the iceberg." Immunologist Professor Alan Baxter tweeted today: "NSW COVID test positivity hits 12.6 percent. A catastrophe." That rate, which doubled in a day, indicates a dangerously high level of undetected infections.

That is not least because the testing system has broken down. Thousands of increasingly outraged infected or exposed people are spending hours, even days, in massive lines trying to get tested, and then waiting up to five days to receive the results.

Epidemiologists are predicting that the crisis will see new cases soaring to between 100,000 and 200,000 per day throughout January and February, unless dramatic action is taken. Doctors are warning that this sheer volume will overwhelm the public hospitals, regardless of the unproven official claims that Omicron is "milder" than Delta.

From the terrible outcomes already experienced in South Africa and the US, Omicron is known to be more serious for children, who under the age of 11 all remain unvaccinated, as well as deadly for elderly and health-compromised people. Cases are soaring among children aged 0 to 9. Since December 1st, 10,118 have been infected, making a total of more than 42,000 since the start of the pandemic.

Aged care infections are also rising. They reached 1,202 in residential and home care programs today, up by about 400 in a week, making more deaths likely. Three of yesterday's recorded deaths were elderly people who were double or triple vaccinated.

Such is the immense concern among health workers public that Australian Medical Association president Omar Khorshid used Twitter to criticise the proposed redefinition of a “close contact” to cover only household members, thus specifically excluding workplace and social exposures.

“Isolating less people means faster spread,” Khorshid warned. “Redefining close contacts will simply accelerate the outbreak.” Omicron “doesn’t care if you are a family member, a co-worker, a drinker in the pub or breathing the same air in a lift.”

This fear and disaffection is widespread among medical experts and health workers. Interviewed last night, a specialist at a major Sydney hospital told the WSWS: “The health system will probably be overwhelmed by mid to late January, unless something changes... There’s going to be misery and suffering and death that is totally unnecessary. The policies our governments are taking will cause further death, much, much further death.”

None of this would be possible without the total collaboration of the trade unions. They are stepping up their efforts to suppress resistance and opposition throughout the working class, including among frontline health workers, just as the union apparatuses have done from the outset of the pandemic in March 2020.

This criminal role is epitomised by Health Services Union secretary Gerard Hayes. He welcomed the decision by the NSW Liberal-National government of Premier Dominic Perrottet to set a national lead by slashing the isolation time for health workers from two weeks to seven days, provided they return a negative PCR test. This means the union will help force health workers back into hospitals and other public health facilities while still potentially infectious, endangering the lives of patients, co-workers, as well as themselves.

As for the Australian Council of Trade Unions, it is running a petition to urge the Morrison government to provide free rapid antigen test (RAT) kits. It is stepping up this campaign, which it has been conducting in partnership with employer groups since October. The aim is to use the tests as a means of keeping workplaces open, knowing that RAT kits are less reliable than PCR tests in providing early detection of infections.

Hand in glove with the unions, Labor and Coalition state and territory governments alike are collaborating with the Morrison government to switch testing from the severely understaffed, under-resourced and overrun PCR facilities to self-administered RATs. That turn is part of a broader move to shift all responsibility for the pandemic onto individuals.

Every day makes clearer the contempt and indifference of the corporate and political establishment for the health and lives of ordinary people, especially those in working class areas, such as Sydney’s western suburbs and the Newcastle region, which are the hardest hit.

NSW Health Minister Brad Hazzard yesterday accused the “worried well” of clogging up testing queues. This provoked

andouthe social media responses, and even corporate media reports, from ill and worried people who had lined up for hours, or slept overnight in cars, often without success, in attempts to get PCR tests in order to protect themselves and their loved ones.

The official contempt flows directly from the requirements of the wealthy elite, which is ever-more blatantly demanding that even the most elementary public health precautions must give way to the interests of private profit.

Jessica Wilson, a policy director at the Business Council of Australia, which represents the biggest companies operating in the country, typified the orders coming from the corporate boardrooms. She said that to continue the nation’s “economic recovery” it needed to “tear down remnants of fortress Australia” and “stay the course on reopening.” That meant “using every tool we can to keep businesses operating, borders open and supply chains working, including using rapid antigen testing.”

To defend themselves, their households and communities, workers need to take matters into their own hands and form rank-and-file safety committees, completely independent of the unions, in workplaces, schools, public health facilities and neighbourhoods.

Elimination of COVID-19 is essential and achievable, but that requires a worldwide movement of the working class, informed by the best medical and scientific advice.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has launched the Global Workers’ Inquest into the COVID-19 Pandemic to expose the official lies and misinformation and outline an opposed program to protect human health and lives, not the profits of the corporate elite. The Inquest is gathering testimony from scientists and workers in all sectors to expose the conditions in workplaces, which are central sites for the transmission of COVID-19.



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