

Australia's governments scrap virtually all safety measures amid skyrocketing COVID cases

Mike Head
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Defying “deep concern” voiced by eminent health experts as COVID-19 infections spiral further out of control, Australia’s National Cabinet of Liberal-National and Labor Party leaders yesterday dismantled most testing and other essential safety measures.

Now fuelled by the highly-transmissible Omicron mutation, the pandemic disaster is exposing the determination of big business and its governments to drive up profits and wealth accumulation, regardless of the human cost in infections, hospitalisations and deaths.

Outrage is intensifying throughout the population, as well as among doctors and public health scientists, because the governments are moving nakedly to satisfy the demands of the financial elite for workers to be herded into workplaces, even if ill or potentially infectious.

Today’s official figures are staggering enough. They show that the number of new daily COVID cases jumped nationally overnight from around 21,000 to more than 32,000, exceeding all modelling forecasts. This was just days after first hitting 10,000, thus showing an exponential rise. Hospitalisations and deaths are also starting to surge, for all the official and media claims that Omicron is “mild.”

These statistics underestimate the true level of mass infection. This is not least because thousands of people have been turned away already from overwhelmed testing sites in recent days. Now, the governments are blocking PCR testing to virtually everyone, unless they are symptomatic after a personal household contact for more than four hours.

That new narrow definition of “close contact” has no medical justification, because Omicron is known to be transmitted via aerosols within fleeting moments. As the OzSAGE group of Australian experts in epidemiology, health and economics protested yesterday in a damning

report: “Risk is not limited to arbitrary four-hour time frames within households.”

The redefinition of “close contact” is doubly criminal. It is not only designed to hide the real scale of the disaster by curbing testing—itsself a violation of basic public health principles established over centuries. It directly serves the profit interests of the corporate elite by allowing employers, backed by the trade unions, to demand that sick and possibly infectious workers return to work, even in hospitals, aged care facilities, retail outlets, nightclubs and all hospitality venues.

That is the class content of the “gear change” that Prime Minister Scott Morrison proclaimed after the yesterday’s National Cabinet meeting of the federal, state and territory government leaders. Morrison declared that people had to ignore the previous public health advice they had received during the pandemic to get tested to help stop the spread of COVID-19.

“If you are anything other than a close contact, and you are not symptomatic, you don’t need to go and get a test,” Morrison said. “Now, I know this is a bit different to what you have been hearing over the last couple of years. That is the gear change.”

Morrison’s contemptuous advice for everyone else wanting to get a test was: “Go to the beach, go and do what you want to do.” That is a recipe for accelerating the catastrophe in order to boost business revenues and share prices.

The government leaders also decided that rapid antigen tests (RATs) would not be provided free, despite costing \$15 to \$50 per test and now becoming the only tests available for most people. The tests would be sold in retail outlets because, in Morrison’s words, that was “what the private market is for.” The leaders decided to overturn previous promises by the New South Wales and Victorian

governments to distribute free RATs.

The National Cabinet further agreed on dangerously reduced isolation requirements. Morrison said people who contracted COVID-19 would need to isolate for just seven days, not the 10 days previously mandated. They would only need to first take a RAT on day six before exiting self-isolation.

“Close contacts” would need to isolate for seven days, but only get a PCR test if symptomatic, then take a RAT on day six. Asymptomatic close contacts “should” take RATs on days one and six.

The alarm among health experts was indicated by Professor Nancy Baxter, head of the University of Melbourne’s school of population health. She told the media that the changes to the close contact definition would fuel the outbreak. It was a case of “Newspeak,” the term coined by George Orwell in 1984 to describe propaganda language that twists ordinary meanings into their opposites.

“The lines for testing will get shorter,” in the short-term, Baxter explained, but the infections would “be invisible until the hospitalisation rates start going up.”

In its report, OzSAGE denounced the governments’ “let it rip” COVID-19 “strategy,” saying it would condemn some people to death, particularly the more vulnerable.

“Despite three doses of vaccine, some patients with cancer and other immunosuppressed people, have substantially reduced protection against Omicron,” it said, noting that about half the adult population had co-existing health conditions.

Omicron was “at least as virulent as the original COVID-19 strain,” OzSAGE warned. It anticipated a 100-fold increase in cases produced “by chains of transmission that could otherwise have been stopped,” which was “likely to overwhelm the health system...”

“We are disturbed by the repeated messaging that only symptomatic people should get tested, when 40–45 percent of transmissions are asymptomatic, and even in people who develop symptoms, the peak of infectiousness is in the two days before symptoms begin.”

As hospital wards reached capacity, more people might die in their homes, the report warned. “One week ago, NSW Health advised people under 50 years to care for themselves at home, without access to Hospital in The Home. This week, they have revised the age cut off to anyone under 65 years. This is the ultimate in ‘personal responsibility,’” OzSAGE said, noting that during the Delta wave, the mean age of those dying at home from COVID in Australia was about 40.

“During any other time, this would have been a national scandal, but it passed without comment or scrutiny from policy makers and health authorities,” the report said.

“Rather than investing in expanded testing capacity,” governments were urging the use of RATs that were less reliable and whose results “will not be counted in official case numbers.”

OzSAGE also voiced concern about the impact of long COVID. “New research from the US shows the virus persists in the brain, the heart, the kidneys and many other organs long after the initial illness, so preventing disease now may prevent long-term chronic illnesses.”

This report presents a devastating picture. Health professionals are appalled at the homicidal policies of the entire political establishment. The report’s recommendations, however, are confined to appealing to the same governments to take stronger, but still limited, mitigating measures.

The only answer is for the working class to take matters into its own hands, guided by the best scientific advice, and fight for the global eradication of the virus. As prominent scientists have explained at webinars hosted by the WSWS, this is both essential and achievable.

The closure of all nonessential workplaces and the transition to remote learning for all schools for a period of two months, together with associated public health measures, could bring viral transmission under control and lay the basis for the elimination of COVID-19. These necessary lockdowns must be accompanied by full financial and social supports for all affected workers and small-business people.

We urge scientists and healthcare professionals to keep speaking out. Participate in the Global Workers’ Inquest into the COVID-19 Pandemic convened by the WSWS to expose the lies and misinformation of the ruling elites and clarify the public on the necessity for an urgent change in policy.

As the WSWS stated on December 24: “Only through the combined mass mobilization of millions of people, armed with a scientific understanding of the pandemic, will we be able to prevent the further needless infections, suffering and deaths of millions worldwide.”



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