

Australian prime minister declares the country must “ride the wave” of Omicron surge

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Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison declared at a press conference yesterday: “We have no choice but to ride the wave. What’s the alternative? What we must do is press on.”

This statement, echoing British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, whose criminal “herd immunity” policies have killed more than 900 people in the last week alone, was an official acknowledgement from the highest level that the Australian ruling class has adopted the same murderous program and will preside over levels of mass infection and death previously only seen abroad.

Already, the consequences of this position are beginning to emerge, with 76 COVID-19 deaths in Australia in the last seven days. Across the country, 13 deaths were reported today, including a double-vaccinated man in his 20s, with no underlying health conditions.

Meanwhile, infection numbers continue to surge, with more than 72,000 new cases reported in Australia today. The national positive test rate of 31.35 percent indicates that this is a vast underestimation of the real figure.

University of Melbourne epidemiologist Tony Blakely yesterday told the *Australian* that reported infection numbers were “a gross underestimate.” Blakely said, in New South Wales (NSW), “the actual number of infections is likely something like 160,000 to 180,000 a day,” five times the official figures.

Morrison’s proclamation came after a meeting of the “National Cabinet,” a de facto coalition comprising state and territory leaders, a majority of which are from the Labor party, and the federal Liberal-National government.

Underscoring the completely bipartisan nature of Australia’s “let it rip” policy, one of its most vocal proponents is John Gerrard, chief health officer for the Queensland Labor government. Gerrard declared on Monday: “I think we just have to assume that all of us are going to be exposed in the next few weeks,” as the government he represents winds back all mitigations.

The National Cabinet ordered further cuts to COVID-19 testing, in moves designed to conceal the magnitude of the pandemic and force workers back on the job even if they are possibly infectious.

Chief Medical Officer Paul Kelly announced that “as part of the living with COVID,” recent changes, introduced by state governments to force health workers exposed to the virus out of

isolation and back to work, would be extended to the aged care sector.

Kelly said this was necessary because, “we need people at work to look after our aged care residents, even if they are at a low risk of transmitting COVID.”

As is true in the hospital system, where more than 3,800 health workers are currently in COVID isolation in NSW alone, the reckless policies of Australian governments have exposed so many aged care workers to the virus that the system is about to collapse. The ruling elite’s only answer is to send the probably infected workers back in to care for those most vulnerable to the disease.

The current wave of COVID has already begun to take hold in aged care facilities. At one nursing home in Clemton Park, in southwest Sydney, 38 residents and 25 staff have tested positive and one resident has died. Despite receiving their first and second vaccine doses more than seven months ago, the residents have not yet received booster shots.

Across the state, more than 650 aged care residents currently have COVID-19.

The crisis in the nation’s hospital system continues to escalate, with 3,283 people currently hospitalised for COVID-19, 208 in ICU, and 65 requiring ventilation. Almost half of the 131 ICU patients in NSW are double-vaccinated.

In NSW, more than 13,000 COVID-19 patients are being “cared for outside the hospital setting,” indicating that official hospitalisation figures are a vast understatement of the real number of people requiring treatment for COVID-19.

This number does not include more than 186,000 cases “self-managed” at home, in line with advice from NSW Health that those with COVID-19 should not seek medical attention unless they have difficulty breathing. Similarly, in Victoria, hospitals have urged people not to attend “unless absolutely necessary,” and emergency departments across the country have been forced to turn away patients presenting with supposedly “mild” symptoms.

Ambulance services are also in crisis. On Tuesday NSW Ambulance declared “status three,” meaning the service was unable to meet demand. High priority cases, meant to be attended within 10 minutes were left waiting more than an hour.

In practice, grievously-ill people have been abandoned and left to their fate.

One such case was a 14-year-old girl in southwest Sydney, who

had previously tested positive for COVID-19. Speaking to the *Sydney Morning Herald*, her mother described watching as her daughter's lips turned blue during a severe asthma attack as she waited more than an hour for paramedics to arrive.

As testing around the country has slowed to a crawl in recent weeks amid a massive Omicron surge, broad sections of the population, including epidemiologists, doctors and the general public, have urgently called for rapid antigen tests (RATs) to be made free and easily accessible.

Despite this, Morrison said yesterday: "Universal free access was not considered the right policy response by all of the states and territories in attendance today, and the Commonwealth."

Instead, the National Cabinet declared concession card holders will be eligible for the woefully inadequate offering of ten free test kits over a three month period.

Regular COVID-19 tests will no longer be provided for truck drivers. This is aimed at shoring up supply chains under conditions where one major logistics company, Australian Container Freight Services, has reported up to half of its east coast workforce is infected or in isolation.

Australians who test positive on a RAT will no longer be required to take a polymerase chain reaction (PCR) test to confirm the result. With no system in place to record RAT results, this is a naked ploy to hide infections and falsely lower reported figures.

The shift to rapid testing not only has the bipartisan support of the Labor and Liberal-National federal, state and territory leaders, but of the unions, which in a united front with business lobbyists, have been demanding wider use of RATs for months.

Test requirements for interstate and international travellers have also been slashed. The reduced testing measures will apply in all states except Western Australia, which did not send a representative to the meeting.

In a clear indication that the relaxation of isolation rules will be extended across the entire working class, the National Cabinet also vowed that a meeting would be held to "consider workplace health and safety requirements with a view to removing any potential obligation to impose testing requirements in workplaces on employees."

In other words, employers will be absolved of any responsibility to ensure workers who have tested positive for COVID-19 do not return to work while they are still infectious. Combined with the tight restrictions on PCR testing, lack of availability of RATs—at any price—and recent redefinition of "close contacts" to include only household transmission, this virtually guarantees infection will be rampant in every workplace.

Already, Woolworths fresh produce shelves have been bare for days across Sydney, with reports on social media that up to half of staff at the supermarket chain's Minchinbury warehouse are off work due to COVID.

Rival Coles is also experiencing shortages. Chief Operations Officer Matthew Swindells admitted yesterday "people may see gaps on shelves," because "the isolation numbers from Omicron are growing rapidly."

The National Cabinet was also adamant that schools must reopen at the end of the summer holidays. Morrison said: "We are all very shared in our view that schools go back and stay back, on day one

of term one." The insistence that schools reopen for in-person learning flies in the face of public health, and is aimed only at ensuring the parents can be forced back to workplaces.

Doctors have warned that they have not been allocated enough vaccine doses to meet demand for school-aged children, and are not allowed to order more. Dr Anna Davidson, from the NSW Central Coast told the *Australian*, "the reality is our kids are not going to be vaccinated for term one."

The decisions made at yesterday's National Cabinet meeting are just the latest confirmation that the Australian political establishment is thoroughly committed to protecting the profits of big business, whatever the cost to human lives.

Morrison's rhetorical question, "what's the alternative?" was intended as a mocking rejection of growing public opposition to the murderous "herd immunity" policies openly proclaimed by all Australian governments in recent weeks.

But there *is* an alternative. The necessary measures to eliminate COVID-19 are well known and could be used to stamp out the virus in just a few months. This has been demonstrated in practice in China and New Zealand, as well as in a number of Australian states which previously eliminated the virus, as a result of public health measures introduced following demands from workers and young people.

Necessary measures include genuine lockdowns, including the closure of non-essential workplaces—with full compensation for furloughed workers—the highest standards of testing, tracing, isolation and quarantine to prevent community transmission and a massive expansion of the chronically underfunded public healthcare system.

This program will only be realised through a mass movement of the working-class, fighting against the capitalist governments that have adopted a program of disease and death in the interests of corporate profit. Workers' rank-and-file committees, independent of the corporatised trade unions, must be established to coordinate the widespread opposition to the "herd immunity" policies and to organise industrial and political action to defend health and lives.

This is a global struggle, requiring the unity of the working class internationally, and a fight for socialism, the reorganisation of society to meet social need, not the interests of a tiny corporate oligarchy.



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