

Australia records eighth-highest weekly COVID-19 infection total globally

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Yesterday, the total number of COVID-19 infections officially reported in Australia since the beginning of the pandemic surged past the one million mark. More than half were recorded in the preceding week. In other words, more infections were recorded in the last seven days than in the 707 days since the country's first case.

While the emergence of the highly transmissible Omicron variant has accelerated infection numbers around the world, the shift has been most pronounced in Australia.

Previously heralded as a relative COVID-19 "success story," Australia has in the past week recorded more infections than all but seven countries worldwide. The numbers everywhere are a significant underestimation of the real spread of infection, but the comparison does provide an indication of the massive surge in Australia.

In per capita terms, the only countries with more than one million inhabitants and a higher reported infection rate than Australia are Ireland, France, Cyprus, Greece, Denmark and Portugal. Of these, only Ireland and Cyprus have a more rapidly increasing rate of COVID-19 deaths.

This transformation is the direct result of the open adoption by the Australian ruling class of the murderous program of "herd immunity." While the profit-driven transition, led by the Labor-dominated "National Cabinet," to "living with the virus" began during last year's Delta wave, the arrival of Omicron in late November was the key turning point.

Across Australia, more than 90,000 infections were reported today, a vast underestimation of the real total, as both polymerase chain reaction (PCR) and rapid antigen tests (RATs) remain difficult to access, and not all states and territories include RAT results in official figures.

More than 3,800 Australians are currently hospitalised for COVID-19, with 341 in intensive care and 92 on ventilators. New South Wales (NSW) remains the worst-affected, with 2,186 people hospitalised.

Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews reported this morning that at least 4,500 health care workers in the state are infected with COVID-19 or in isolation.

Twenty-seven deaths were reported in Australia today, 13 in Victoria, 11 in NSW and 1 each in Queensland, South Australia and the Australian Capital Territory. Nine of those who died in NSW had received at least two doses of COVID-19 vaccine.

The surge of infections is throwing virtually every industry into chaos. Goldman Sachs estimated yesterday that between 24 and 76 million work hours will be lost this month to COVID-19 illness and isolation.

Virgin Australia announced yesterday that it had been forced to cancel 25 percent of scheduled flights in January and February due to staff shortages caused by COVID-19 infection and exposure, as well as booking cancellations by would-be passengers concerned over the rapidly spreading virus.

Woolworths CEO Brad Banducci warned yesterday that customers could expect to see bare supermarket shelves for at least another two weeks.

He told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's (ABC's) Radio National "Breakfast" program, "between 20 and in some cases 40 percent" of the company's distribution centre workers were infected with COVID-19 or in isolation.

Australia's other major supermarket chain, Coles, faces a similar situation, with 30–35 percent of warehouse workers and 10 percent of retail workers off due to the virus.

The crisis is affecting the whole supply chain, with trucking companies reporting up to 50 percent of drivers unable to work. According to the Australian Dairy Products Federation, up to 40 percent of dairy workers are sick or in isolation.

Rather than any move to stem the spread of COVID-19 through the country's supply chain, state and federal

governments have responded by slashing isolation rules for workers in food production and distribution. While NSW was the first to order workers exposed to the virus back on the job, the Labor-led states of Queensland and Victoria immediately followed.

Making clear that the federal government would not shift from its position that public health must be subordinated to the profit demands of big business, Morrison declared: “You can push through, or you can get locked down. We’re for pushing through.”

In relation to the changes to isolation rules, Morrison claimed, “anyone who is symptomatic or has COVID, they are not going in to work,” in fact this dangerous practice is already being carried out.

Workers at the Teys Australia abattoir in Naracoorte, South Australia (SA), were told in an email Sunday to “present to work tomorrow as normal unless you are feeling unwell,” even if they had tested positive for COVID-19.

The state health authority confirmed this, telling the ABC: “To ensure food security, SA Health has allowed a small group of critical staff who have tested positive and are asymptomatic, to continue to work in an isolated area away from others.”

These workers have been herded back into the factory to ensure the continued profits of the company despite the clear and acknowledged risk that they will infect their co-workers.

The SA Health spokesperson continued: “These workers must remain at home and isolate when they are not at work until they are cleared from COVID.”

This is a stark example of the class character of the pandemic response. Rampant infection and illness in the workplace is not only tolerated, but actively fuelled by the actions of the state, while the workers themselves are excluded from participating in any aspect of society that does not produce a profit for their employer.

The experience at this South Australian meatworks provides a clear indication of what is being prepared for the entire working class.

The catastrophic state of Australia’s supply chains and health system, rapidly spreading to virtually every other industry, is the direct product of the murderous “let it rip” policies adopted by the entire political establishment.

The unions have offered up only mealy-mouthed criticism of this reckless policy. Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) secretary Sally McManus yesterday wrote to Morrison requesting a meeting to “discuss the support needed for working people who are

now on the front line of the Omicron crisis.”

McManus harkened back to the close collaboration between the unions and the federal government in 2020, when mass sackings saw hundreds of thousands suddenly unemployed Australians queuing outside welfare offices. Australia’s unions stepped in to offer their services to the government as a force to keep the lid on popular opposition amid the explosive social crisis.

The ACTU and the government changed the awards covering millions of workers, allowing for unpaid overtime and other attacks on conditions. Together, they crafted the JobKeeper wage subsidy, a government handout to the largest corporations valued at hundreds of billions of dollars. Throughout the pandemic, the unions have forced workers into unsafe workplaces and have done everything they can to suppress opposition.

The four measures called for by McManus yesterday: free rapid antigen tests, paid pandemic leave for close contacts, N95 masks for workers and COVID-19 support payments for business, have little to do with keeping workers safe, and are in fact aimed at ensuring business can continue to operate with minimal disruption.

The intervention of the ACTU is a commitment to suppress mounting hostility among the working class to the rapidly escalating COVID-19 crisis.

Workers in health, transport, warehousing, food manufacture, and throughout the working class must reject the lies that Omicron is “mild,” and the efforts by Labor and Liberal-National governments, with the backing of the unions, and in line with the demands of business, to herd them back to work to infect their colleagues.

This requires the formation of rank-and-file committees, independent of the corporatised unions, in every workplace, to discuss and carry out the necessary actions, including strikes, to ensure safe working conditions for all.

Ultimately, what is needed is a broader fight for the elimination of COVID-19 in Australia and globally. This cannot be achieved outside of a mass mobilisation of the working class, guided by a socialist perspective in which public health is prioritised over private profit.



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