Australia records deadliest week of pandemic as governments force more close contacts back to work

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Across Australia, 221 COVID-19 deaths have been reported in the past week, the highest number in a seven-day period since the start of the pandemic. New South Wales (NSW) and Queensland also recorded their highest daily death tolls today.

In NSW, 22 deaths were reported this morning. The majority, 14, were vaccinated. Queensland reported six deaths, more than one-third of the state's total during the pandemic. Twenty-five people died from COVID-19 in Victoria in the past 24 hours.

These grim figures did nothing to halt the drive by the Australian ruling elite to further slash isolation rules and force potentially infectious workers back to work. National Cabinet will meet this afternoon to discuss the expansion to broader industries of exemptions currently applying to workers in food production and distribution, as well as health and aged care.

As has frequently been the case in recent months, Victorian Labor Premier Daniel Andrews is leading the charge.

Andrews announced today that reduced isolation rules for close contacts, which came into effect this morning in food production and distribution, will be extended to a broader list of industries. From Tuesday, Victorians exposed to COVID-19 and potentially infectious will be herded back to work in emergency services, education, critical utilities, custodial facilities, transport, freight and "critical state government projects."

The inclusion of education on the list follows yesterday's statement by state Education Minister James Merlino that teachers and students will "absolutely" be forced to return for in-person learning on "day one, term one." This is under conditions where vaccinations for children aged 5–11 only began on Monday, meaning not a single child in this age range will be fully vaccinated when school goes back.

In the last ten weeks of the 2021 school year, more than 920 schools were closed or partially closed in Victoria as a result of COVID-19 infections, at a time when active cases in the state were just 7 percent of current figures.

The insistence that children must return to school has nothing to do with concerns over their education. Instead it is motivated by the demands of business that their parents must be able to return to work rather than stay home to supervise remote learning.

This is especially pressing now with the surge in COVID-19 cases resulting in staff shortages across virtually every industry. Supermarket shelves are bare and fast food chains have been forced to cut menu items because of supply constraints.

More than 150,000 new COVID-19 cases were reported nationally today, including 92,264 in NSW, where rapid antigen test (RAT) results were reported for the first time. Today's figure includes RAT results dating back to January 1. In Victoria, 37,169 cases were reported, while 14,914 were recorded in Queensland.

In NSW, 2,383 people are hospitalised for COVID-19, with 182 in intensive care units (ICUs) and 60 on ventilators. More than half of those in ICU have received at least two vaccine doses. More than 5,500 health care workers are infected with COVID-19 or in isolation.

The health system in Queensland is also in an escalating crisis. Some 556 people in the state are hospitalised for COVID-19, 26 are in ICU and 10 on ventilators.

In a statement Tuesday, the Queensland branch of the Australian Paramedic Association wrote that the state's ambulance service was "on its knees." Paramedics, the statement claimed, face shortages of personal protective equipment, and are being forced to work shifts longer than 12 hours and attend call-outs alone.

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According to the APA, some Queenslanders have waited as long as six hours for urgent ambulance call-outs.

Doctor Sonu Haikerwal from the Haan Respiratory Clinic on the Gold Coast told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, "the hospitals are inundated."

Haikerwal reported that she had even had an ambulance bring a patient to her clinic because the hospitals were overstretched.

Haikerwal said: "We've got a full-blown crisis—I had a lady with potential sepsis who needed to be admitted but was sent home because they're so overwhelmed by COVID."

In Victoria, COVID-19 hospitalisations continue to grow since surpassing on Tuesday the previous record set during the height of the Delta wave in October. Today, 946 people are hospitalised with the virus in the state, with 111 in intensive care and 29 on ventilators. Twenty-five deaths were reported today, the third highest number since the start of the pandemic.

More than 6,600 Victorian health workers are currently unavailable for work due to COVID-19 infection or exposure.

According to a report in the *Age* yesterday, during some shifts in recent weeks, more than 70 percent of triple-zero emergency calls in Victoria were not answered on time. In December and January, callers have consistently waited more than five minutes to get through to an operator to request an ambulance.

The massive surge of COVID infections has exacerbated longstanding staff shortages in the service. One worker told the *Age* an electronic board in the call centre that changes colour according to wait times was almost always red.

The worker said: "Every now and again it goes orange, to indicate that [the wait] is less than four minutes. But it's rare that it's green where there are no calls waiting. It generally doesn't last more than a few minutes."

Victorian Ambulance Union Secretary Danny Hill parroted the government line that the breakdown was the result of people calling emergency services unnecessarily, admonishing the public, "it's only for dealing with emergencies."

With GPs overrun and unable to answer all phone calls, let alone see everyone seeking an appointment and hospital emergency departments turning away people with "mild" symptoms, emergency services are the last option for the hundreds of thousands of people left to "manage" the deadly disease alone at home.

Across Australia, there are almost 3,000 active COVID-19 cases among aged care residents, with outbreaks at around 500 facilities.

For months, Australia's state, territory and federal Labor and Liberal-National governments, corporate media and unions have insisted we must "live with the virus," for the sake of the economy. In fact, this criminally reckless approach has catapulted the country's productive forces into a crisis.

With critical industries in tatters, the ruling elite is doubling down on its murderous "let it rip" policies, forcing infectious workers back on the job. In addition to accelerating the growing wave of infection, illness and death, this will only exacerbate the labour crisis as increasing numbers of workers become too sick to work.

The working class must now quite literally take their lives into their own hands. Independent rank-and-file safety committees must be formed in every workplace to prevent management and the unions from continuing to place the health and lives of workers and families at risk.

The role of these committees includes making the decision to shut down production where appropriate.

The growing number of "fully-vaccinated" people hospitalised and dying from COVID-19 makes clear that while it is a crucial tool, vaccination alone cannot end the pandemic, or limit transmission and severe illness to a point where the health system can continue to function properly.

What is urgently required is the intervention of the working class, which must demand an immediate halt to all non-essential production and a move to remote online learning in the schools and the universities, as the first steps in a fight for the elimination of COVID-19.

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