

Australian governments forcing COVID-exposed workers to stay on the job, pressing ahead with school reopenings

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13 January 2022

A meeting of the “National Cabinet” yesterday, involving all of the country’s state, territory and federal governments, decreed that employees can be forced to remain working in a host of industries even if they live with someone who is COVID-positive and are thus likely to be infected themselves.

The announcement is the culmination of a weeks-long stripping back of close contact and isolation requirements. Having pursued a “let it rip” policy as Omicron emerged late last year, the governments are invoking the mass spread of the virus and a resulting supply-chain crisis to do away with even the most minimal infection controls. They are ensuring that their previous declarations that everyone will likely be infected with the deadly virus come to pass, so that big business operations can proceed.

This agenda is completely bipartisan, with Labor state and territory leaders constituting a majority of the National Cabinet. They have not only marched in lockstep with the federal government, but have become some of the most aggressive proponents of the “live with the virus” policy, especially Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison began a press conference after the meeting by bluntly stating: “The idea that our measures, as governments across the country, Commonwealth and at a state and territory level, is to prevent everyone in the country from being infected with the virus, that is not the objective.”

The very concept of protecting society from mass transmission, by isolating those exposed to the virus was outdated. “This notion of exposure sites, which means you’re a close contact, that’s Delta. That’s in the past,” Morrison declared.

All of these measures, allowing the uncontrolled spread of the virus, are based upon the claim that Omicron is “mild,” which was advanced by Australia’s governments, Labor and Liberal-National, within a week of the new variant having been discovered. Infections, the argument goes, have been decoupled from deaths and severe illness.

With this completely untested premise as justification, governments have allowed over a million confirmed infections to occur in the first fourteen days of this year, compared with

fewer than 400,000 in the first two years of the pandemic.

But a journalist noted at yesterday’s press conference that Morrison was repeating these claims of a “mild” virus, as Australia recorded its most daily deaths yet—57 fatalities. There have been over 560 deaths in the past two months, more than 20 percent of the national total since the COVID crisis began.

Morrison’s response was chilling. Omicron was “mild,” he insisted, because most people infected would experience a “mild illness.” This unsubstantiated claim completely ignores the potentially debilitating consequences of the conditions known as “Long-COVID.”

Even so, Morrison was forced to acknowledge that it was entirely possible that the new “mild” variant would kill more people than did Delta. “So if you’ve got a much bigger number of people who’ve got the virus but a smaller proportion with severe illness, well, that number can be bigger simply because you got more people with a virus,” he said.

Regardless, the governments were pressing ahead. Morrison pointed to Treasury warnings this week that up to 10 percent of the workforce could be furloughed as a result of COVID infections and exposures. If the schools were not opened at the end of January, there would be another five percent of parents out of the workforce.

The government’s “solution” is to compel potentially sick workers onto the job, and millions of teachers and students into schools that should be renamed as mass incubation centres for the virus.

Two weeks ago, the National Cabinet redefined a “close contact” as somebody who had spent four or more hours inside a house with a COVID-positive individual, thereby excluding all workplace transmission.

At the beginning of this week, the Liberal-National government in New South Wales (NSW), together with the Labor governments of Victoria and Queensland, declared that the food production and distribution sectors would not have to adhere to even this stripped-back definition. They cited a supply chain crisis, caused by their own program of mass infection, which has seen up to half of the nation’s truck drivers off work isolating, and similar infection rates in food

production plants.

At yesterday's meeting, the National Cabinet essentially declared that what began in food production will become the new normal of employers across the board forcing potentially-infected workers, who live with a COVID case, to remain on the job.

The long list of industries that may be exempted because they are considered "essential" indicates that millions of workers will be covered. It includes health, welfare, care and support; food, beverage and other critical goods; transport, freight and logistics; energy, resources and water, and waste management; telecommunications, data, broadcasting and media; financial and insurance services; education and childcare; emergency services, safety, law enforcements, justice and correctional services; essential research; critical government functions, federal, state, or local government and public works; accommodation and real estate, and jobs that support the above categories.

The state and territory governments will announce how broadly they are applying the listing, which was issued after days of talks between the federal government and big business representatives.

Significantly, Labor Premier Daniel Andrews announced the exempted industries in his state of Victoria, even before the National Cabinet had met. This was a clear signal of complete bipartisanship.

The *Sydney Morning Herald* has revealed that Andrews and extreme-right premier of NSW Dominic Perrottet are collaborating closely on "planning" for the forced resumption of in-person schooling in their states. The National Cabinet meeting assigned this task top priority. Not only will teachers be forced to stay on the job when they live with a COVID case. Everything will be done to ensure that the schools remain open, amid mass outbreaks.

As Morrison declared: "The first principle is that child care and schools are essential and should be first to open and last to close." As he blurted out, this has nothing to do with the stated concerns over the mental health of children or the quality of their learning. The real issue is that, "If schools don't open, then that can add an additional 5 percent to the absenteeism in the workforce. So it is absolutely essential for schools to go back."

The implications of the new rules are already clear. In some industries, including in NSW hospitals and several food-production plants, workers who are not only close contacts, but are actually COVID-positive, have been kept on the job.

This was the case at Teys Abattoir in the South Australian town of Naracoorte. Earlier this week it was revealed that a cohort of infected workers were being instructed to continue working because they were essential to operations and had been granted a state government exemption. Assurances were made that they would be isolated from their co-workers and transmission controls would be put in place. Today it was

reported that the factory has now shut, after the virus spread to 140 of the plant's workers.

One worker told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation that the decision to continue operations had been "insane." "The other staff that I've spoken to, they're bloody angry about it. There's a lot of workers that have family here, you know, young kids and all that, nobody feels that they want to be the one going on and making someone sick just because work told them to."

Several trade union leaders have responded to the changing close contact requirements by expressing their concern, and even denouncing the measures as an endangerment of workers' safety. The teacher unions have made mealy-mouthed statements, calling for enhanced safety measures in the schools, and for talks with governments on the timetable for the reopening.

But the unions are functioning as a linchpin of the entire "live with the virus" program. They are enforcing the dangerous workplace conditions, suppressing any industrial or political action by workers. Their role was epitomised by an open letter from Australian Council of Trade Unions Secretary Sally McManus to Prime Minister Morrison this week, in which she pledged: "We stand ready to work with government."

Workers must take matters into their own hands by forming rank-and-file safety committees in every workplace, completely independent of the corporatised unions. These must reject government "herd immunity" program, including by fighting for a shutdown of all non-essential industries and remote online learning in the schools and the universities, as the first step in a struggle for the elimination of the virus.

Above all, the fact that masses of workers are being infected by a deadly virus, so that big business activities can continue in full, exposes the bankruptcy of the capitalism system. The alternative is the fight for a socialist perspective aimed at reorganising society to meet social need, including by placing health and lives above corporate profit.



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