

Australian governments claim Omicron surge was inevitable, the odd state out proves they are lying

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Having lifted all remaining safety measures and allowed Omicron to circulate beginning last month, Australian governments, Labor and Liberal-National, have presented the resulting wave of massive infections as an inevitability which could not have been avoided.

Increasingly, the virus and its impact are being discussed as though there is no connection between government policy and the spread. Omicron's infectiousness is invoked to insist that its mass transmission cannot be prevented. Governments speculate that the wave may be "peaking," based on no evidence whatsoever, as they press ahead with policies, including the mass resumption of face-to-face schooling, which will lead to even greater infection tolls.

The lies and obfuscations are aimed at covering up the fact that allowing the uncontrolled spread of the virus is official policy. Governments dispensed with previous suppression measures, which had repeatedly succeeded in reducing transmission and even eliminating it, solely to ensure that full corporate profit-making activities could resume.

This can be demonstrated, not only by comparing the current surge with previous stages of the pandemic. It is also made clear by contrasting what has occurred over the past month in the states and territories that have let the virus rip, and the one state that has delayed its abandonment of the previous suppression program, Western Australia (WA).

Across the country, there have been almost 1.8 million confirmed infections since December 15, roughly when the Omicron surge began, compared with 235,562 in the previous two years of the pandemic.

Even these staggering figures do not capture the extent of the shift, because the testing regime effectively collapsed within weeks of Omicron beginning to spread. Epidemiologists have stated the true infection toll is likely several times higher than the official figure, meaning multiple millions of cases in the past month, in a country of 25 million people.

In that period, there have been just 203 confirmed

infections in WA, which has a population of 2.7 million and accounts for a third of the country's land mass.

It should be recalled that the WA infection tally is probably the most reliable of any jurisdiction in the country. Contact-tracing continues to be carried out, identifying those who have potentially-been infected by a confirmed case. Exposure sites, which have been visited by a confirmed infection are publicly announced, with those in attendance urged to get tested immediately.

Such basic measures are almost inconceivable in the country's other states and territories, especially New South Wales (NSW) and Victoria, which have seen the highest number of cases. The assumption, acknowledged by governments who reject minimal public health measures, is that the virus is more or less everywhere and the entire population has or will be exposed.

WA, moreover, recorded no new cases for six days between December 15 and 20, as daily infections were exploding in the eastern states. The current WA infections are linked to border entries, initially bringing the Delta variant. There are now confirmed Omicron cases, but the public health measures in place mean that there has not been an exponential growth as has occurred everywhere else.

WA's 203 confirmed infections compare with 806,409 in NSW and 560,300 in Victoria, over the same period since December 15.

The contrast is even starker, when WA is juxtaposed with what has happened in South Australia and Queensland. The respective Liberal-National and Labor governments of those jurisdictions opened their state borders last month, having experienced very low transmission throughout the entirety of the pandemic.

In Queensland, there had been just 2,180 cases during the COVID crisis, prior to December 15, in South Australia 1,031. Since then, there have been 280,156 confirmed infections in Queensland and more than 85,000 in South Australia. Similar, though less striking contrasts could be

drawn between WA and other states and territories that previously had low transmission.

In WA, there has not been a single death since May 2, 2020, with total fatalities remaining at nine.

Nationally, 773 deaths have been recorded since December 15 out of 2,890 in the entire pandemic. The three weeks of this year have been deadlier than any other period during the pandemic. This week, NSW and Victoria have recorded their highest daily fatalities. In Queensland, 16 deaths were reported on Tuesday alone. Total fatalities in the state have climbed to 72. As of December 15, there had been just seven COVID deaths throughout the pandemic in Queensland, with none in the previous six months.

The mounting number of victims in the states and territories that have reopened have not been able to “live with the virus” as governments have proclaimed. Nor are the hospitals. In NSW, Victoria, Queensland and increasingly the other jurisdictions where the virus is circulating freely, the healthcare systems are confronting their deepest crisis in a hundred years.

The point of these comparisons is not to present WA’s Labor government as a resolute defender of public health. It is not.

WA’s experience throughout the pandemic, moreover, has been shaped by its peculiar features. It is the least densely-populated area of Australia, and its only truly mass city Perth is often described as the most isolated capital in the world. The state has been the beneficiary of the unprecedented mining boom, which has at times contributed to longstanding and historically-rooted secessionist tendencies.

The Labor administration, like all of Australia’s other governments, instituted lockdown and safety measures early in the pandemic only as a result of demands from the working class, especially key sections, such as healthcare staff and teachers. These effectively eliminated transmission in WA. Taking advantage of its isolation, the state government maintained largely stringent border controls, despite providing dangerous exemptions to the mining conglomerates.

A state election was held in March 2021. Labor leader Mark McGowan combined right-wing tax and subsidy policies for the mining companies, with declarations that his government had and would continue to keep the population safe from COVID. The Liberal opposition bemoaned this, declaring that WA would be cut off from the rest of the country, and, according to the Murdoch press, would become a “hermit kingdom.”

The election effectively became a referendum on pandemic policy. Under conditions in which most recent polls have seen a swing against the incumbents, Labor won

its largest victory in the state’s history. It secured 53 seats in WA’s 59-member Legislative Assembly and 22 of the 36 positions on the Legislative Council, the upper house of parliament. The opposition Liberal-Nationals were reduced to a rump with only a handful of MPs.

The result demonstrated the mass popular support for essential public health measures, especially in the working-class. Many, moreover, noted that in addition to protecting health and saving lives, the policies preventing COVID transmission meant that life largely proceeded as normal in WA, notwithstanding the difficulties associated with the border closure.

McGowan has sat on the “National Cabinet,” the extra-constitutional body composed of the state and territory leaders and the federal government. Together with all of them, he backed a “national plan” to end lockdowns and restrictions for all time, voting for it in July and August last year.

The Labor government has held off longer than other states and territories, because it is terrified of popular opposition. But against the warnings of doctors, nurses and epidemiologists, it plans to lift border restrictions on February 5, with warnings that the 2,000 cases thus far in the pandemic could rapidly become 60,000 Omicron infections per day. With McGowan having done nothing to boost the crisis-ridden public hospital system, the same catastrophe overcoming the other states would rapidly be replicated in WA.

This only demonstrates that the program of mitigation and suppression, by governments that accept the framework of subordinating public health to corporate interests, is over. The lines of struggle are increasingly between a ruling elite and its political representatives that insist on mass infection for the foreseeable future, and a perspective of eliminating the virus, not just from one state, but throughout the country and internationally.

This requires urgent measures, such as the closure of non-essential workplaces, with full compensation for workers, and online learning in the schools and the universities. But these necessary policies impinge on the profit interests of the corporate elite. The fight against the virus thus requires a political struggle by the working class against capitalism and all of the governments that defend it.



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