

Australia: Shepparton resident supports Global Workers' Inquest and speaks on “living with the virus” in regional community

Sue Phillips**20 January 2022**

The *World Socialist Web Site* has received an important contribution to the Global Workers' Inquest into the COVID-19 pandemic from Jeremy Jones, a Shepparton resident.

Shepparton is a regional city 180 kilometres north of Melbourne, the state capital of Victoria, with a diverse population of around 67,000. It has a significant refugee population from Afghanistan, and 3.4 percent of residents identify themselves as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders.

The community provides a microcosm of the social problems facing many Australian regional communities with growing disadvantage as a result of decades of government cuts to health, education and social services. In January 2018, even before the COVID-19 pandemic, youth unemployment in Shepparton reached 16.1 percent.

In the last several years, four secondary schools have been amalgamated and replaced with a super-school, jamming more than 2,000 students into one campus that is opening this year. Despite widespread community opposition to the super-school, the Victorian state Labor government has proceeded, running rough-shod over parent, teacher and community sentiment. Critical student well-being and special needs programs have been eliminated through the amalgamations, and experienced teaching staff have been gagged and forced out.

Like many regional communities, Shepparton has been impacted by COVID-19, with the Omicron surge seeing escalating infections in the last weeks. Hospitals have reached crisis point, as demand is exceeding capacity and some medical treatments are being cancelled or indefinitely delayed. This week the Victorian government declared a “code brown” emergency across the state due to escalating infections. This includes at the Goulburn Valley hospital in Shepparton, which is presently running without 160 staff who have been furloughed due to COVID infections. Nearly 100 of these furloughs are from the previous week.

Jeremy Jones is a 37-year-old single father with a 17-year-old son looking to finish his final year of secondary school. Jones has previously worked for more than six years as a chef and up until mid-last year was a clerk and office manager at a local

business. He submitted the following statement to the WSWS:

“Living with this virus” is hurting far more than just those who are unfortunate enough to be afflicted with it. It is hurting our relationships and our mental health; it is the subject most of us talk about and what most of us dwell upon day in and day out. People have varying opinions regarding the virus, from its severity to the way it should be defended against. These varying views are hurting us all as it leads to directionless measures, or worse, complete inaction. Our impotent “leaders” have put profit above health and are actively hurting those that should be protected.

In August 2021 COVID inevitably infected our town, not in the larger numbers we were seeing in the bigger cities, but it attacked our kids first at their schools and sent a panicked shockwave through the town. A primal protective reaction took over and almost the entire town dropped their lives and rushed to collect our kids from what was considered an unsafe place. What followed was days of testing and uncertainty as a populace who hitherto was not overly concerned with the virus or the vaccine came to terms with the probability they were not as invulnerable as first thought.

At least at this time we felt somewhat protected as the government allowed for us to have time from work, shut down the schools for contact tracing, and gave us daily updates to try and quell the rise of the virus through our community. This was all sparked by what now seems a meagre twenty-one cases...

As our infection rate quickly rose our community stood up, we raced to be vaccinated, we isolated ourselves from the public, we did everything asked of us to put an end to this horrible situation. Yet as we rose to the occasion, sacrificing so much and losing even more, our “leaders” were giving up the fight. Soon came the announcement that we were to “live with the virus,” they were making the outright foolish move to make COVID endemic.

Now the rhetoric had changed from protection and prevention to having to live with the fact that infection was inevitable and some of us may die at apparently acceptable losses, all in the name of capitalistic financial greed. With this change in conversation came the call to return all students to school so

their parents can get back to work, a move so blatantly financially focussed they didn't ever bother to lie about it. We were thrown to the wolves and told to return to work as it was impeding their precious economy.

It has been a long-held belief of mine that a capitalist-focussed governing body cares more for coin than for its people and would always put whatever lined their pockets with gold above the needs of its followers. Yet this cruel and blatant attack on our children and community was still something I did not consider would be the action taken, but there it was in front of us, cold and plain as day—"Your health is not as important as our wealth."

My son is 17-years-old with aspirations of attending the Australian Defence Force Academy and becoming a pilot and officer in the Royal Australian Air Force. His dreams are dependent on commitment and good health, so during this period we have fought to keep him at home and complete his Year 11 studies and exams from the safety of isolation. To this end I have also given up my job and have stayed in self-imposed isolation from August 2021 to now.

Unfortunately, not all families have the capacity or the determination to allow such a move now that our government has forsaken us and made our protection from this virus a purely personal affair with not even a semblance of assistance. As long as the government and employers' accounts are not affected and the rest of us are out making money for others and dying quietly in a corner, then we are all "doing our part" regardless of the dreams and futures being cruelly and needlessly snuffed out in the process.

As predicted by all and heeded by none, COVID-19 mutated into the Omicron variant. Promises made and golden handshakes taken, the government had to continue with this cruel and murderous policy of endemicity, watching the situation ever worsening and continuing to bombard us with propaganda that this variant is milder and that hospitalisations will be lower, telling us our vaccination is the ticket out of this mess, all the while knowing that we were only vaccinated against the Delta variant and three shots are required to even start to fight Omicron.

People are so sick of being locked down and feel they have paid their dues that they are giving up or are prepared to accept these lies so they can get on with their lives. Most believe that being double vaccinated they are now immune to everything and as that was the message blasted at us from every media outlet so we would be diligent little drones and relinquish our money over the holiday period, that belief can hardly be blamed on the individual.

Now with Omicron absolutely rampant throughout the country thanks to these horrendously uncaring policies, we are expected to once again do our part with mask mandates, density restrictions, bans on singing and dancing, restrictions on elective surgery, and mandatory rapid antigen test reporting while our government does effectively nothing.

These measures are the absolute least they could come up with and those among us with even a slight intellect can see they are all measures that only affect the individual, they in no way impact their precious economy and won't anger the government's financial overlords.

These measures will do nothing in the grand scheme of things and are the worst realisation of lip service and population placation I have seen in some time.

"Living with the virus" is hurting more than just those that are ill. My son, bombarded with this propaganda and seeing most of his friends going to school and living their lives whilst he sits at home, is now demanding to return to school this year regardless of the risk to his future. We were organising to do his schooling remotely and now due to this propaganda it looks as though he will be returning to an extremely disrupted and absentee-stricken single building school of over two thousand students, mingling with every other family in this town with a belief that all will be fine, when in reality his Year 12 will be the most disrupted and dysfunctional school year he has seen to date.

As I sit here and watch the daily infection rate jump from forty in our town yesterday to one hundred and thirty today, I see nothing but complete COVID coverage throughout our town this year. My son is 17. I could demand he stay at home and do his schooling from here to keep him safe, however, how far would that damage our relationship if it is not what he believes? At his age how can he be forced to accept a solitary year when everyone else is out there living their life, regardless of the consequence. The issue with this is that in all probability his health will be fine, but although double vaccinated and boosted we won't know if our immune systems are up to the task until it is too late and we are infected, that is a risk I am loath to take as damage to his body now or at length through long COVID could crush his long-held dreams.

From the height of countrywide hospital overcrowding forcing those with other ailments to simply fend for themselves whilst the overworked and underappreciated do their utmost to create miracles, to relationships and mental health within my very own lounge room, "living with the virus" hurts us in more ways than simply becoming ill.

Although I do not believe the pandemic began as a man-made attack, it has certainly been used as such by those in positions to gain from it. I fully support the Global Workers' Inquest and it is my hope that it will shine a light on the most selfish and uncaring of our "leaders" for their direct action or intentional inaction, so they may be judged for profiteering from the people's pain.



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