

Australia's COVID explosion shows workers must fight for global elimination of the virus

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With the international surge of Omicron, capitalist governments around the world have increasingly dispensed with any pretense of seeking to contain the deadly virus, or even mitigate its worst effects. More and more, their openly stated policy is to allow massive infection for the foreseeable future, meaning continuous global waves of illness and death unprecedented outside of wartime.

The shift in the world situation finds one of its sharpest expressions in those countries that previously implemented public health measures to successfully suppress transmission, but have since adopted the “live with the virus” program.

Australia is a case in point. In the first two years of the pandemic, to last December 15, there were just 235,000 total infections. In the five-and-a-half weeks since, there have been 1.9 million confirmed cases, in a country with a population of 25 million.

To the end of July last year, i.e., roughly the first 18 months of the COVID crisis, total infections stood at 32,000. Now, official daily cases are twice or three times that number, fluctuating between 70,000 and 100,000. With unchecked transmission, epidemiologists warn that real case numbers could be several times higher.

The virus is rampant in the largest states, New South Wales (NSW) and Victoria, with government officials declaring that everybody likely has COVID or will be exposed to it. The change, however, is starkest in those states that previously had little or no transmission. Queensland, for instance, with a population of five million, recorded just over 2,000 cases in the entire pandemic to mid-December, and seven deaths. In the last six weeks, it has registered more than 300,000 infections and 88 fatalities.

The mounting death toll is a national phenomenon, refuting government claims that Omicron is “mild” and that serious illness and death have been “decoupled” from infection. In the first three weeks of this year, there have been more than 800 deaths, compared with 2,200 in the previous two years, but doctors are warning that these tragedies are just a foretaste of what is to come.

Like their counterparts internationally, Australia's national and state governments present the toll as inevitable and Omicron's rampant spread as almost an act of God, over which they have no control. The aim is to cover up the fact that the current calamity is the result of their dismantling of basic public health measures so as to create the conditions for unfettered corporate profit-making.

In Australia, the efficacy of public health measures is not a theoretical question. The low number of infections and fatalities in the first two years of the pandemic, compared with the catastrophes in Europe, the US and elsewhere, was the result of testing, contact tracing, isolation and lockdown measures that enjoyed mass popular support.

Australian governments did not implement these policies out of a benevolent concern for public health. In the earliest stages of the pandemic, they rejected a scientifically based program of striving to eliminate the virus, on the grounds that it would be too “costly.” Under intense pressure from the working class, however, especially key sections such as health staff and teachers, they adopted a policy of “strong suppression” amid outbreaks.

While they were undertaken by governments grudgingly, belatedly and with a host of pro-business exemptions, the suppression and lockdown measures repeatedly succeeded in quashing outbreaks of the virus. Despite it not being their stated aim, these policies eliminated transmission at least once in every Australian jurisdiction, in some cases for extended periods.

Mid-last year, the corporate elite and its political representatives, who had long bridled against the population's “addiction to lockdowns,” seized on the emergence of Delta to claim that the previous policies were no longer viable. In July and August, all of the country's governments, Labor and Liberal-National, adopted a strategy of permanently ending safety restrictions, based on arbitrary vaccination targets.

The governments ignored the warnings of epidemiologists that inoculation, as critical as it is, cannot end the pandemic alone. They were taking business, not health advice,

summed up by a letter from 80 of the world's largest corporations, featured by the *Financial Times*, declaring that Australia must "open up."

With this "reopening" already underway, the Australian ruling elite responded to the emergence of Omicron with glee. Less than a week after the new variant was identified in a South African lab, Australia's chief medical officer, Paul Kelly, like the firefighter turned arsonist, declared that the mass spread of Omicron would be his "number one Christmas present."

As the new variant was already circulating in the community, the NSW government held a "Freedom Day" on December 15, encouraging mass attendance at nightclubs and other super-spreading events and ending all restrictions, even indoor mask-wearing. Victoria's Labor government adopted similar policies, while the states and territories with zero COVID opened their borders, literally welcoming Omicron in.

The governments' claims that this would usher in a new era of "freedom" and a "return to normal" stand exposed as the lying justifications for a massive social crime against the population. The testing system, dominated by private companies given vast government subsidies, broke down within weeks. The hospitals are in their worst crisis in 100 years. Patients with cancer and life-threatening heart conditions are already being told that their treatment is indefinitely postponed.

The fight against the pandemic is ever more directly assuming the form of a class struggle.

The desperate warnings of health workers about the collapse of the hospital system are dismissed as "alarmist." Prime Minister Scott Morrison declared last week that such is workplace transmission that 10 percent of the entire national workforce could be furloughed at any one time. The official response is to force workers who have been exposed to the virus and could be infected to remain on the job.

Remote learning, Morrison warned, would add another "five percent absenteeism to the workforce," so the schools must be reopened at the end of this month and early next month to ensure that parents are in their dangerous workplaces. Already, NSW and Victoria are assembling a replacement workforce, composed of university students and vulnerable retired educators, in anticipation that thousands of teachers will be struck down by illness.

There is mass opposition, expressed in widespread hostility to the schools reopening and the first stirrings of industrial action. Governments and business chiefs are bemoaning the attempts of ordinary people to institute a "shadow lockdown" by isolating as much as they can.

The surge has shown that the fight against the pandemic

requires a struggle against the entire political establishment, including the trade unions, which are doing everything they can to keep workers on the job and to suppress opposition. Rank-and-file committees must be established at all workplaces to fight for the measures required to end transmission, including the immediate closure of non-essential industry, with full compensation for affected workers and small businesspeople, and online learning.

The developments in Australia have international significance, demonstrating that the period of capitalist governments pursuing a middle course of mitigation is over. New Zealand, one of the few capitalist countries to have adopted an elimination strategy, has abandoned it, with Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern declaring that the spread of Omicron is inevitable, even before the new variant enters the community. The highly successful zero COVID policy in China is relentlessly denounced and vilified by the world's governments and the corporate media.

The Australian experiences underscore the fact that the pandemic cannot be ended in one country; that vaccination alone is insufficient to end transmission; and that the public health measures previously implemented and now abandoned are decisive.

Above all, they demonstrate that the fight for the elimination of the virus requires an international movement of the working class, armed with scientific and political knowledge. The necessary public health measures, including the shutdown of non-essential industry, are blocked on the grounds that they would impact on corporate profit. That only makes the case that capitalism must be abolished, the major banks and corporations placed under public ownership, and society reorganised along socialist lines to meet social needs.



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