

# Western Australian government keeps border shut, fearing mass opposition to COVID disaster

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With COVID infections, hospitalisation and deaths soaring across the rest of the country, Western Australian Premier Mark McGowan called a media conference last Thursday to abandon his state Labor Party government's previous policy of reopening the state's borders on February 5.

The decision indicates the rising social and class tensions, and deepening political crisis, being produced by the COVID disaster that has been let loose nationally by Australia's governments, both Labor and Liberal-National.

McGowan declared: "A lot of people say we should be living with COVID. Well, there are 752 people in the eastern states no longer living with COVID." (That was a reference to the number of Australian COVID deaths so far in 2022, which is now nearly 900). "You should ask their families whether we should deliberately infect large numbers of West Australians."

McGowan's use of the word "deliberate" is accurate. After nearly two years of limited, yet largely successful, safety measures, Australian governments have let the pandemic rip, solely for the sake of corporate profit.

His announcement was furiously denounced by most of the corporate elite and capitalist media for allegedly damaging the supposed "economic recovery." But it was met with some relief by the state's health workers, teachers and working people generally, who have been alarmed by the terrible scenes in the eastern states and territories.

Until now, Western Australia (WA) has remained one of the few jurisdictions in the world, alongside China, with relatively low and suppressed COVID-19 infections, although the McGowan government's policy has never been to eliminate the virus, just to try to keep mitigating its impact.

With the state's borders closed, the 2.7 million people of Western Australia have largely avoided the mass infections, hospital breakdowns and record numbers of "lives lost" that have overtaken the rest of the country since December, when every other government nationally scrapped virtually all

safety restrictions.

By diverging, at least for now, from this "reopening" of the economy imposed last year by the bipartisan "National Cabinet," McGowan's government has shown its fear of the fury and disgust that would erupt in the working class in response to similar conditions, as is developing nationally.

McGowan set no new date for lifting the international and interstate border controls. He suggested waiting until 80 or 90 percent of the eligible population had been able to get a third "booster" vaccination, while admitting that this would not fully protect the population. He said advice from the government's chief health officer was that this level of vaccination would increase Omicron protection from 4 percent to 64 percent.

WA has many remote and indigenous communities, scattered across one-third of the Australian landmass. It has some of the lowest Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander vaccination rates, with just 43 percent aged 16 and over double-vaccinated.

The decision to delay the February 5 deadline, which had been agreed by the National Cabinet, was made knowing that the state's public hospitals—which have the lowest number of beds per capita in the country—would be rapidly overwhelmed.

Modelling suggested that if entry and quarantine rules were scrapped, the highly-infectious Omicron variant could peak at as high as 60,000 cases a day in the state, which yesterday had less than 100 active reported cases, and only 1,348 cases throughout the pandemic.

WA's hospital system is at breaking point, even without a single COVID-19 patient. Ambulance ramping—the length of time ambulances wait to discharge a patient outside a hospital—reached 52,000 hours in WA in 2021, more than double the number of hours in 2020. When the McGowan government took office five years ago, the ramping figures were five times lower and even then were labelled a "crisis."

The human cost of years of public hospital funding cuts in

WA, by both Labor and Liberal-National governments, was highlighted last April by the death of seven-year-old Aishwarya Aswath in the Perth Children's Hospital emergency department. She waited more than two hours to receive treatment, despite multiple pleas for help from her parents.

The number of intensive care unit (ICU) beds per capita is 30 percent below the national average, which itself is inadequate. Booming iron ore and other mining exports produced a \$5.8 billion budget surplus for the Labor government last year, but it has continued to starve the hospitals of the necessary funding and staffing.

Much of the corporate media responded to McGowan's move with outrage, both for blatant profit reasons and for concern that the WA move would highlight the criminal nature of the "let it rip" program inflicted by every other government. Qantas and other travel and tourism businesses claimed they would lose nearly \$500 million in coming months as a result.

Today's headline in the Murdoch media's *Australian* declared: "WA border backflip to hurt nation, CEOs warn." It cited Business Council of Australia president Tim Reed who literally insisted that people had to "live with the virus" in order to uphold "our reputation as a good place to invest and create jobs."

"The virus is here to stay and the longer restrictions stay in place the bigger the damage to the economy and to people's mental health and wellbeing," Reed said.

Such pretense for "mental health and wellbeing" is a fraud. For working people, the aged, the medically vulnerable and schoolchildren and their families, "living with the virus" is having serious and traumatising impacts on their health and already-parlous financial position, while the super-rich elite has doubled its wealth during the pandemic.

One factor in McGowan's announcement was the support of key sections of business, particularly the mining giants and related companies that dominate WA's economy. They have continued their lucrative operations without any COVID-related disruptions throughout the pandemic. Among those defending the decision were Michael Chaney, chairman of the Wesfarmers retail conglomerate, and property developer Nigel Satterley, one of Labor's high-profile donors.

Acute political nervousness was reflected in media commentary that the WA stance would be another blow to the crisis-wracked federal Liberal-National Coalition government of Prime Minister Scott Morrison, whose polling ratings have dropped dramatically since the Omicron wave was let loose in December. *Australian* columnist Peter Van Onselen noted: "WA residents have watched on as

states like South Australia, Tasmania and Queensland went from COVID-free places to COVID-riddled communities."

Equally revealing was the reaction of federal Labor leader Anthony Albanese. He said he "respected and supported" the WA decision. Yet Labor has fully backed the corporate "reopening" drive, including the National Cabinet deadlines for dismantling all safety, border and quarantine measures. Labor's leaders are well aware of the popular hostility to the "live with the virus" disaster, in which they are totally complicit.

Only last March, Labor won a landslide victory in the WA state election by posturing as a defender of the population against COVID and an opponent of the Morrison government, which was already then demanding the opening of the state's borders. Morrison's Liberals were reduced to a rump of just two MPs in the state's 59-member lower house of parliament.

This was not just a WA phenomenon. Labor earlier won elections in Queensland, the Northern Territory and the Australian Capital Territory, as well as New Zealand, by similarly posturing as standing firm for public safety.

If such results were replicated in the looming federal election, Morrison's government would be decimated, despite the lack of working-class support for Labor's pro-business policies and record.

But no reliance can be placed in McGowan's, or any other Labor government. Together with the trade unions, they have worked systematically to prevent eruptions of working-class opposition.

As the Socialist Equality Party explained in its recent open letter to workers in Australia: "Urgent action must be prepared, including strikes and shutdowns to close non-essential workplaces and to prevent children and teachers being forced into schools that will function as incubators of mass illness and death."



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