

More than 1,000 COVID deaths in Australia since January 1

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In the first 26 days of 2022, 1,073 deaths from COVID-19 have been reported across Australia. The macabre four-digit milestone was reached with the announcement today of 87 fatalities in the past 24 hours.

At an average of more than 40 deaths each day since the beginning of the year, COVID-19 is now killing Australians more than ten times as quickly as it did between March 2020 and December 2021, and five times as fast as at the height of the Delta outbreak, between July and November last year.

Victoria reported 35 COVID-19 deaths today, while New South Wales (NSW) recorded 29, South Australia 13, Queensland 9 and Tasmania 1. Throughout the country, 5,240 people are hospitalised for the virus, with 373 in intensive care and 135 on ventilators.

In NSW, the only state which reports this information daily, two of the deaths reported today were people in their 50s, three in their 60s, two in their 70s, 16 in their 80s, and six in their 90s. Seven were unvaccinated, while 16 had received two doses and six had received three doses.

As of January 23, 71.8 percent of NSW patients hospitalised for COVID-19 had received at least two vaccine doses, up 1.6 points from the previous week. With only 79.8 percent of the state's population (including children) double-vaccinated, the convergence of these figures makes clear that vaccination, as critical as it is, cannot prevent mass illness and death alone.

Of the country's overall COVID-19 death toll of 3,299, more than one-quarter have occurred in the past two weeks, more than one-third in the past four weeks, and almost half in the past three months.

The leading cause of death in Australia is ischaemic heart disease, which in 2020 killed an average of 45 people each day, according to Australian Bureau of Statistics figures. Were the COVID-19 death rate to continue at the rate seen since January 1, the disease would displace dementia (including Alzheimer's disease) as the country's second-highest killer.

Yet the position of the Australian ruling elite is to pretend these deaths are not occurring. Having repeatedly told the

public "infections don't matter," the country's leaders now point to daily fluctuations in case numbers as evidence that Omicron has "peaked," making virtually no mention of the mounting fatalities.

They are covering up the reality of "living with the virus," under conditions where the supposedly "mild" Omicron variant is dominant. This is Chief Medical Officer Paul Kelly's "number one Christmas present," as he described the prospect of mass infection with the new strain in late November last year.

At least 163 of the deaths recorded in the first three weeks of this year occurred in aged care, where the virus is rampant. According to Department of Health data, on January 20, 7,861 residents and 11,198 staff were infected with the virus, up from 3,208 and 3,806 just six days earlier.

As of January 20, there were 1,198 active outbreaks across the sector, more than half the total number since the start of the pandemic, meaning the death toll is likely to soar in the coming days and weeks.

Aged care facilities continue to report difficulties acquiring rapid antigen tests (RATs), and, according to the *Guardian*, some centres are requiring visitors to bring their own.

Richard Colbeck, the federal aged care minister, claimed "delivery of rapid antigen test kits is currently being prioritised to facilities in outbreak or recent exposure." Despite this, St. Basil's Homes Chief Executive Michelle Church said that at one of the organisation's facilities, which is currently experiencing an outbreak, only 600 of 1,300 RATs ordered three weeks ago from the national stockpile have arrived.

Church said she had "no faith in the Commonwealth delivering on their promise made on the 23 December 2021 that they would supply free of charge RAT kits to all aged care providers."

It is against this backdrop of mounting deaths that Australia's state, territory and federal governments, Labor and Liberal-National alike, are forcing teachers and students back into unsafe schools in the coming days and weeks.

The bipartisan attack on the working class throughout the pandemic was exemplified by the united front presented by Victorian Labor Premier Daniel Andrews and his NSW Liberal-National counterpart Dominic Perrottet in announcing “pretty much identical” back-to-school plans on Sunday.

The reckless reopening drive has nothing to do with concern for the education of children, but is entirely bound up with the need to drive parents back to work, under conditions where vast numbers of workers are infected with COVID-19 or in isolation.

Opposition to the campaign to herd teachers and children back to school is growing. Teachers in South Australia voted by a two-thirds majority Monday for strike action against the planned resumption of in-person schooling next week.

The Australian Education Union, well aware that teachers around the country are equally hostile to the return, is working to shut down the strike.

An early indication of what is about to take place in schools can be seen in the childcare sector. According to the *Sydney Morning Herald*, in the first week of January, 18,720 children were unable to attend childcare in NSW because hundreds of facilities were closed due to COVID-19 infection and exposure among staff.

Julia Davison, chief executive of Goodstart Early Learning, told the *Herald*: “Hundreds of children are absent from centres and hundreds of staff are isolating each day.”

She continued: “Families are telling us they are very worried and are keeping children home.” According to the Early Learning and Care Council of Australia, childcare attendance has dropped by half.

The current wave of infection, illness and death is a direct result of the “let it rip” policies of Australia’s state, territory and federal governments, Labor and Liberal-National alike. In line with the demands of big business, governments responded to rising infections by abandoning virtually all public health measures, slashing testing and contact tracing, and reopening domestic and international borders.

Perhaps the sharpest expression of this is in Queensland, where mandatory quarantine for domestic travellers was abolished by the state Labor government on December 13. Until that date, the state had recorded 2,176 COVID-19 infections. Now, just over six weeks later, Queensland has recorded 358,336 cases.

Prior to January 7, only seven people had died from COVID-19 in the state. Queensland reported just one death from the disease in 2021. Today, the cumulative toll stands at 138.

Despite daily new cases still averaging more than 13,000, Queensland’s Chief Health Officer John Gerrard claims the outbreak has “peaked” on the Gold Coast, in the states’s

south east, and the capital Brisbane will soon follow.

Gold Coast Health’s medical director of infectious diseases, Kylie Alcorn said: “We’re not sure that we’re at our peak, hopefully we are, but we’re very cautious about that and also even if we have reached our peak we expect the tail to be very long.”

Alcorn emphasised that “COVID is not going away and we just don’t know how many patients we’ll have.” There are currently 889 hospitalised COVID-19 patients in the state, with 47 in intensive care and 15 on ventilators.

Claims that Omicron has peaked, or will soon peak, are utterly unscientific, given declining testing rates around the country.

The reality is, virtually every action taken by Australian governments in response to the pandemic in recent weeks is creating the conditions for future waves to be even larger and more deadly.

Reopening schools will lead to a surge in cases. This has been openly acknowledged by every leader responsible for the murderous plan. Redefining close contacts to exclude transmission in workplaces and schools, and reducing isolation periods or removing them entirely, will guarantee that the next variant spreads even more rapidly.

The emergence of new variants is itself the product of the “let it rip” policies of capitalist governments internationally. In the interests of maintaining the profitable operations of big business, vast swathes of the world have been turned into a giant petri dish for the continued mutation of the virus. China, where a highly-successful zero-COVID policy continues to quash small outbreaks, is the notable exception.

Workers must reject the false claims that Omicron is “mild,” has “peaked,” or will somehow bring about its own demise—something that no natural infection has ever done.

Instead, teachers, health and aged care workers, together with the broader working class, in Australia and internationally, must take up a fight for the global elimination of COVID-19. The experiences of the past two years make clear that this cannot be done within the framework of capitalism. It requires a struggle against the entire political establishment, for socialism, the reorganisation of society to meet human need, not private profit.



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