

Australia: Over 500 COVID-19 deaths in residential aged care since January 1

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As COVID-19 infections soar across Australia, record numbers of outbreaks and deaths are being recorded in residential aged care facilities. This is a result of the murderous “let it rip” policy being pursued by state, territory and federal governments, Labor and Liberal-National alike, sacrificing lives to ensure the uninterrupted flow of corporate profits.

Almost one-third of COVID-19 deaths recorded in Australia since the start of this year have occurred in residential aged care, with 533 deaths of aged care residents reported from January 1 to February 4. The death toll in the sector is higher than the 282 deaths recorded in the entirety of 2021, and fast approaching the 685 deaths recorded throughout 2020.

There are at least 1,176 active outbreaks of COVID-19 in residential aged care facilities across the country, with 5,439 active infections among aged care residents and 6,541 among staff. The majority of active outbreaks are in NSW (525 facilities), followed by Victoria (275), Queensland (202) and South Australia (137).

The pandemic has intensified a decades-long crisis in aged care. Deepening privatisation and the gutting of public healthcare carried out by successive governments, Labor and Liberal-National, has meant that the needs of the elderly are subordinated to the profit requirements of the corporate and financial elite.

Numerous reports and inquiries over decades have revealed abysmal conditions in aged care, with chronic understaffing, a lack of trained staff, and inadequate resources producing the neglect and abuse of residents, who suffer widespread malnutrition, dehydration, untreated sores and infections and social isolation.

Nothing has been done to boost the aged care system during the pandemic. In its May 2021 annual budget, the Liberal-National Coalition government announced it would spend a measly \$17.7 billion over the next five years on aged care. This is a mere fraction of the \$20 billion per year the 2018 Royal Commission into Aged Care calculated as the minimum the sector would require to address the crisis.

With large numbers of workers furloughed due to COVID-19 infection or exposure, aged care staff face increasingly brutal workloads. There is constant pressure to work overtime, and staff have reported working as many as 15 days in a row. Some aged care workers who are close contacts of positive COVID-19 cases have been ordered back to work while potentially infectious.

Staff in the sector continue to be forced to work across multiple sites. A prohibition on this practice was lifted in November 2020 and has not been reinstated, although this was one of the main ways the coronavirus entered aged care facilities in previous outbreaks.

The rapid spread of COVID-19 through aged care facilities has also been fuelled by a lack of appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE), including the necessary N95 or P2 masks, shortages of Rapid Antigen Tests, and inadequate infection control measures.

As part of the campaign to normalise mass death, especially among those most vulnerable to COVID-19, health minister Greg Hunt stated that, in aged care: “Approximately 60 percent of those that have passed were in palliative care.”

This amounts to a deliberate culling of the elderly and vulnerable, whom the financial and ruling elite deems “unproductive.”

Moreover, aged care minister Richard Colbeck told a Senate hearing Wednesday that 34 percent, or some 80,000, residents who had received two doses of a COVID-19 vaccine had not yet received the necessary booster, with double vaccination providing virtually no effective protection from Omicron. Reportedly, just 40 percent of aged care workers have received a third dose.

As with the initial vaccine rollout debacle, Colbeck attempted to shift the blame onto elderly residents and their families for not receiving a booster, declaring that they were, “making their own choice.”

Families of aged care residents have refuted these claims and reported difficulty in accessing boosters, even though some residents received their second dose of a vaccine more

than six months ago.

The federal government's booster program for aged care facilities only commenced in November last year. Over Christmas, while Omicron spread rapidly and aged care COVID-19 infections mounted, the vaccine program ground to a halt. The private contractors engaged by the government to deliver boosters administered just 2,280 doses across the country between December 23 and January 9.

By January 11, just 1,700 out of the 2,700 federally funded aged care services across Australia had been visited by medical firms providing boosters.

Federal Labor Party leader Anthony Albanese has called on Aged Care Services Minister Richard Colbeck to resign, in an effort to deflect from the fact that "let it rip" is a bipartisan policy. Labor state and territory leaders constitute a majority of the National Cabinet and have become some of the most aggressive proponents of "living with the virus."

Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews is leading the charge, and has in recent weeks collaborated closely on the reopening of schools with Liberal-National New South Wales Premier Dominic Perrottet. Previously identified with limited lockdowns and public health measures, Andrews is now providing political cover for Perrottet and Prime Minister Scott Morrison.

Morrison declared in a National Press Club address on February 1: "Our health response has ensured that our health and aged care system has stood up to the global pandemic."

This is an utter lie. As Morrison spoke, there were active outbreaks in around 44 percent of Australia's aged care facilities, where more than one third of COVID-19 deaths have occurred during the pandemic.

Overwhelmed by COVID-19 patients and staff shortages, hospitals in New South Wales and Victoria have only been able to function in recent weeks through the postponement of "elective" surgery, including urgent cancer and heart procedures, and the dangerous slashing of isolation rules for potentially infectious workers.

Morrison promised aged care workers two \$400 "retention" payments, while rejecting calls for wage rises. The award wage for a full-time, entry-level aged care employee in Australia is just \$21.62.

In an indication of the growing opposition among workers to the policies of death and exploitation, one aged care worker wrote on Facebook: "We don't want a bonus that we get taxed on, give us a bloody good pay rise... I used to love my job, but recently it's been so hard to stay focused when you're pushed to your limits by working short staffed most shifts, wearing full PPE and just worn out!"

Another wrote: "We have been let down by the politicians, CEOs of Aged Care and all departments within. They treat us as slave labour and care little for our wellbeing. This has

been going on now for decades and needs to change."

A third worker wrote: "We need to also look at our union ... had the union at our facility this week and she said we are fighting hard to get pandemic leave! They have had 2 years to get pandemic leave! ... also did nothing with the last bonus for all aged care worker to receive it and I guess it will be the same this time."

The attacks on public health and aged care services could not have been carried out without the full support of the trade unions, which have enforced stagnant wages through sell-out enterprise and industrial agreements.

During the pandemic, the unions have not called for lockdown measures, the closure of non-essential production, or any other public health measures necessary to stop the spread of the pandemic and save lives. Instead they have marched in lock-step with governments in ensuring there could be no impediment to the profit-making operations of business.

The death of 1,500 aged care residents since February 2020 is a stark example of the Australian political establishment's indifference to the health and lives of the working class. None of the capitalist parties, or the corporatised trade unions, have any intention of ending the pandemic, or of resolving the longstanding issues plaguing the health and aged care sector.

To stop the spread of the pandemic and save lives, workers must take matters into their own hands and establish rank-and-file safety committees, completely independent of the unions. These committees must fight to build a broad political movement of the working class to take forward the struggle to eliminate COVID-19, and to fight for a workers' government and socialism, under which public health and aged care will be operated to serve human need, not the profit interests of the wealthy elite.



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