

Australian ruling elite steps up “let it rip” program amid mass school infections, aged care deaths

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As their COVID policies produce thousands of cases among teachers and school students, and an ongoing wave of death, Australia’s state and federal governments have embarked on a new stage in the campaign to normalise mass infection and force the population to “live with the virus.”

Accompanied by a state and media propaganda blitz, asserting that the “peak” of infections has passed, the governments are imposing policies that they admit will result in further surges.

Yesterday, Prime Minister Scott Morrison suddenly announced that international borders would be fully reopened in a fortnight’s time. Border restrictions already have been substantially lifted since November, when governments declared an end to lockdowns and other safety measures. But from February 21, all visa holders, tourists and others will be allowed to enter the country with only nominal requirements—in most states just to self-isolate for several days.

Arrivals must be vaccinated, but only with two doses, which provides virtually no protection against Omicron. That guarantees that as the virus circulates unchecked in much of the world, creating ample opportunities for mutation, any new variant will quickly arrive in Australia. These same governments made a deliberate decision to allow Omicron to enter the country in late November.

Morrison made no attempt to hide the fact that the new border policy is dictated by business interests. It would “give certainty to our vital tourism industry,” which had “generated more than \$60 billion for the Australian economy” in 2018–19. The government was also working for a “resumption of the cruise industry,” whose vessels have played the role of plague ships, spreading the virus everywhere.

The border announcement, hatched in the federal cabinet’s secretive “national security committee,” was made amid a deep crisis of the Liberal-National government and the entire political establishment, driven by popular opposition to the

“let it rip” policies. The government is unraveling with Morrison’s ability to survive to the federal election, due to be held in May, in doubt.

Morrison is seeking to assuage fears in the ruling elite that his government is unable to impose the continuing reopening agenda, and the accompanying plans for stepped-up pro-business restructuring.

Business chiefs immediately welcomed the border decision. Alan Joyce, the CEO of the country’s largest airline Qantas, said it meant Australia is “finally back open for business.”

In another snap announcement, Morrison declared yesterday that up to 1,700 Australian Defence Force personnel would be dispatched into aged care homes. The sector has become a killing field, with 533 fatalities reported from January 1 to February 4, roughly a third of the total COVID death toll over that period.

The mass deaths have become a focal point of popular hostility to the government, exacerbated by Aged Care Minister Richard Colbeck’s decision to spend days at the cricket last month, as the crisis accelerated, and his refusal to acknowledge any government failure.

The military deployment is bound up with a refusal to boost resourcing for aged care and any area of the health system. The government has sanctioned dangerous practices, including nurses and carers working across multiple homes, which resulted in previous waves of deaths. Its preoccupation is with protecting the profits of the major corporations that dominate the sector, as a result of its substantial privatisation by successive Labor and Liberal-National governments.

What the soldiers are to do remains unclear. Morrison acknowledged that most were unqualified to provide care. Instead, they could help “screen” visitors, assist in meal preparation and provide “companionship” to residents. Some journalists pointed to the incongruous image of uniformed soldiers with vulnerable elderly people, many

suffering from dementia. Questions along these lines, as well as whether the residents would be frightened, were brushed aside.

This points to the other aspect of the deployment. Amid its crisis, the government and the political establishment as a whole are flirting with openly authoritarian measures, including normalising the presence of the military in civilian life. One need only ask: what will the soldiers do, if aged care workers launch industrial action demanding improvements to their unbearable working conditions? At the very least, the military personnel would function as strikebreakers.

This underscores the criminal political role of the union leaderships. At a protest in Canberra today, called by the Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation, union speakers complained that they had been calling for a military deployment into aged-care for the past four weeks. The unions, speaking for a privileged bureaucracy tied to governments and the profit system, have done everything they can to suppress opposition to the dangerous conditions in aged care and across health. Now they are calling in the military.

Labor leader Anthony Albanese, while bemoaning the government's "disarray" and "disunity," backed both yesterday's announcements on the borders and aged care. He is positioning Labor as a more reliable instrument to impose the "live with the virus" program and the accompanying attacks on workers' rights and conditions.

The bipartisanship is starkly demonstrated by the school reopenings. With the resumption of face-to-face classes by the Queensland state Labor government this week, in-person teaching is now underway across the country.

The dire consequences were made plain this morning, with the Victorian Labor administration's education minister James Merlino revealing that 7,046 school students and 925 staff have tested positive for the virus since schools returned Monday last week.

That is more than double the figures provided by the government on Friday. If the rate continues, close to 10 percent of the school population will have tested positive by the end of term.

Merlino contemptuously declared: "Teachers and students are just loving to be back at school." The Australian Education Union, which helped force its members into the COVID-infested classrooms, says nothing about the infections and deletes any reference to them from its Facebook page.

In Queensland, where the schools opened without basic mitigations, the government's health officer John Gerrard said he expects a third of the state population to be infected by the end of the month, and the other two-thirds over the

following months. Gerrard has decried any attempts by ordinary people to protect themselves, insisting that the virus is "literally everywhere."

Gerrard religiously repeats the assertions that the "peak has passed," ignoring the obvious contradiction with everything else he is saying.

Tens of thousands of confirmed cases are being recorded across the country every day, despite the official numbers being rendered all but useless by the conscious dismantling of the testing regime. There are often days when fewer than 100,000 Polymerase chain reaction (PCR) tests are administered, in a national population of more than 25 million. In New South Wales (NSW), the most populous state, just 29,634 PCR tests were reported on Saturday, the lowest number since June, and down from a high of more than 250,000 last year.

The turn to less reliable and self-administered rapid antigen tests, which remain scarce, is aimed at suppressing case numbers. Deaths, while they are still reported, are downplayed. Some 540 fatalities have been recorded in the eight days of this month, so it is well on track to be the deadliest of the pandemic yet.

The Western Australian Labor government yesterday announced changes to close contact rules, excluding most workplace and "casual" transmission. That sets the stage for a major Omicron surge in the state, which had previously suppressed the virus through public health and border measures.

The homicidal ruling-class program is encountering mounting opposition, as are dire working conditions. This is why the NSW Nurses and Midwives Association felt compelled to ballot its members on a statewide strike for February 15. The union is seeking to limit the action, and direct it behind plaintive appeals to the governments responsible for the crisis.

The Socialist Equality Party is holding a public meeting this Saturday to build support for the strike, break through the pro-business "reopening" operations of the unions and begin a fightback of healthcare staff, teachers, students and all sections of the working class, against the "let it rip" agenda. Register here.



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