Australia to treat COVID like the flu amid mass school infections, record deaths

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Australia's national cabinet met yesterday to discuss moving to "Phase D," the final stage in the country's reopening plan, under which any pretence of seeking to contain COVID transmission will be dispensed with.

The Labor-dominated national cabinet agreed that, under the so-called "post-vaccination phase," the Commonwealth, states and territories will proceed with further relaxations of international border restrictions and the removal of the few remaining COVID-19 public health measures.

According to the "national plan," in this phase, management of COVID-19 will be "consistent with influenza or other infectious diseases." In other words, what is being prepared is the complete removal of all testing, monitoring and infection control measures. Any semblance of a society-wide public health response to the continuing global pandemic is to be abandoned, as mass infections, illness and death are treated as the "new normal."

This is in line with the drive by capitalist governments around the world, with the eager support of the corporate media, to claim that the virus is becoming "endemic." As with the comparison to influenza, the misuse of the term "endemic" is medical misinformation that has been condemned by principled epidemiologists. While falsely implying a lessening in the severity of the pandemic, what it means in practice is endless waves of mass infection for the foreseeable future.

The new stage in the "let it rip" campaign is finding its sharpest expression in the country's schools, where students and teachers have been herded back in order to force parents into their workplaces to ensure the flow of corporate profits.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has learned that this week, at least 6,888 students and 600 staff in Victorian schools have tested positive for COVID-19. Last week, 4,514 students and 800 staff tested positive.

A Department of Education spokesman trotted out the Orwellian government line that the mass transmission of the virus is somehow a positive. He told the WSWS the detection of almost 13,000 cases among children and education workers "shows that our program is working," because the infections were being identified, which would supposedly "keep school communities safer."

Despite this, the spokesman reported: "No schools have closed due to coronavirus outbreaks or staff shortages." This week's Victorian figures have not been reported by a single media outlet other than the WSWS, nor made public by the department.

A spokesperson for the New South Wales (NSW) education department said the department did not have figures on the number of students and staff who had tested positive for COVID-19 in the past week, referring further inquiries to the health department. A health department representative, in turn, directed the WSWS to the education department.

With the circle of buck-passing and stone-walling complete, no one is the wiser as to how many students and educators have been infected with a potentially-deadly virus over the past week in Australia's largest state.

In NSW and Victoria the twice-weekly RAT testing program is only planned to continue for the first four weeks of term. Perrottet said on Tuesday it was "unlikely" to be extended beyond the end of the month.

Queensland Chief Health Officer John Gerrard today announced that 1,149 student infections were recorded in that state in the 24 hours to this morning.

The Labor administrations of Queensland and Victoria, in lockstep with the Liberal-National NSW and federal governments, are now working on plans to restart the cruising industry in the coming months.

Since the earliest days of the pandemic, cruises have functioned as plague ships, spreading the virus everywhere.

From February 21, "fully-vaccinated" international tourists will be allowed to enter the country without an exemption, and subject only to pre-departure and post-arrival rapid antigen tests (RATs).

Western Australia is the only state or territory that still requires "fully-vaccinated" international arrivals to self-isolate and the isolation period was halved to seven days on Wednesday.

The Australian Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation (ATAGI) yesterday updated its advice to say that a third dose of COVID-19 vaccine was necessary to bring people aged over 16 "up to date."

The cautiously-worded statement was deliberately engineered to avoid changing the definition of "fully-vaccinated" to

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require a “booster” dose. This would have major implications for the reopening drive, which is predicated on the lie that removing public health measures is “safe” once arbitrary vaccination targets are met.

While 93.9 percent of Australia’s adult population has received at least two doses of COVID-19 vaccine, just 46.3 percent have received a third dose.

The national cabinet decided yesterday that third doses will only be made mandatory in the aged care sector, in which 533 residents died from COVID-19 in the first 35 days of the year.

NSW Nurses and Midwives Association (NSWNMA) General Secretary Brett Holmes last week endorsed the state government’s refusal to mandate third doses for health workers, stating that doing so would place the government in a “difficult position.”

ATAGI’s meek recommendation means that third doses will not be required for international travellers to enter the country without quarantine.

Queensland Labor Premier Annastacia Palaszczuk said: “We are very happy with the advice of two jabs.” Her NSW Liberal-National counterpart, Dominic Perrottet, declared: “We cannot live in a hermit kingdom on the other side of the world.”

Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews had previously flagged requiring international travellers to the state to be triple-dosed but backed down yesterday. Andrews said Victoria would implement “consistent rules that will probably mean they won’t be perfect rules.”

Earlier in the week, Tourism Minister Dan Tehan made clear that the removal of all restrictions on international travel was bound up with the economic interests of the $61 billion tourism industry. In order to “make travelling in Australia as easy as possible for visitors,” he said, governments were “removing barriers to travel and cutting red tape.”

The reality is these “barriers” and “red tape” have been the major factors in allowing Morrison to blithely claim last week that “Australia’s management of the pandemic measures up extremely well to other countries.”

Under intense pressure from the working class, Australian governments were, in the first 18 months of the pandemic, forced to implement suppression and lockdown measures that repeatedly succeeded in shutting down outbreaks. Such measures have been almost entirely abandoned since late last year, however, resulting in the massive surge of infection illness and death in recent months.

In January alone, more than 1,500 people died from COVID-19 in Australia. According to the Actuaries Institute, this represents an increase of around 10 percent to the country’s mortality rate.

The consequences of removing travel restrictions have been sharply demonstrated in recent months with the reopening of Australia’s domestic borders.

Prior to December last year, Queensland and South Australia had recorded a combined total of 11 COVID-19 deaths and 3,061 infections. Now, the two states have recorded 502 deaths and 605,718 infections.

Queensland Chief Health Officer John Gerrard claimed yesterday that the state had established a “wall of immunity” through vaccination, but that it was “credible” half the population would be infected by the end of the month.

The Northern Territory had not recorded a single death before December 4 and has now reported nine, including five in the past week.

Today, 51 COVID-19 deaths were reported around Australia, including 19 in NSW, 14 in Queensland, 13 in Victoria and 2 each in South Australia and the Northern Territory. The death of a 70-year-old man in Western Australia from COVID-19 was announced today, the first in that state since May 2, 2020. Currently, 3,298 people are hospitalised for COVID-19 and 258 are in intensive care.

With 722 COVID fatalities in February thus far, this month is shaping up to be as deadly, or even more lethal, than January.

The murderous “let it rip” program embraced by the Australian ruling elite is running into growing opposition among the working class. In an indication of the mounting anger and frustration of health workers, the NSWNMA was forced to call a vote of its members on whether to carry out a statewide strike on February 15.

The union plans to limit the action to a narrow subset of its membership and subordinate them to bankrupt appeals to the very governments responsible for the massive spread of COVID-19.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) has called 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.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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