

Australian governments abandon remaining COVID-19 restrictions as deaths mount

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1 March 2022

Australian state, territory and federal governments have announced the removal of virtually all remaining public health measures against COVID-19.

While all objective evidence points to the fact that current conditions are worse than at almost any other time, Australian governments, Labor and Liberal-National alike, have effectively declared the pandemic over.

This is part of a process underway globally, with the exception of China, which continues to implement a highly successful zero-COVID strategy. The major capitalist governments, basing themselves on the demands of the financial elite, are eliminating any impediments to corporate profit-making activity, in a program of “forever COVID.”

Across the country, 1,413 deaths from the virus were recorded in February. While this is lower than the total of 1,519 in January, the worst month on record, the daily average increased slightly to 50.46. More than half of the 5,171 COVID-19 deaths since 2020 occurred in just these two months. Based on pre-pandemic averages, the virus remains the leading cause of death in Australia.

Since the Omicron surge began in December, the country’s testing and contact tracing infrastructure has been almost entirely dismantled, in line with the Labor-dominated “National Cabinet’s” decree that COVID-19 “management” will be “consistent with influenza, or other infectious diseases.”

Polymerase chain reaction (PCR) testing for COVID-19 is at the lowest level since June 2021. The majority of testing is now left up to individuals, who must in most cases source, pay for and administer rapid antigen tests (RATs) themselves. While it is mandatory to report positive test results, this is totally unenforceable. Negative RAT results are not recorded, meaning it is impossible to gauge the real level of infection within the community.

Despite the massive decline in testing, more new infections continue to be recorded each day than at any point in 2020 or 2021. In the last seven days of February, 161,663 new COVID-19 infections were reported across the country, an average of more than 23,000 per day. There are currently

204,220 active cases of COVID in Australia, higher than on all but 48 days of the pandemic.

In New South Wales (NSW), Victoria and the Australian Capital Territory (ACT), indoor mask mandates were scrapped last Friday in all but a handful of settings, including public transport, health and aged care facilities, airports and aircraft. This follows the February 18 removal of most density limits, reopening of dance floors and, in NSW, elimination of QR code check-ins.

From today, Victorians will no longer receive a \$450 payment if they need to self-isolate while waiting for COVID-19 test results.

Queensland Labor Premier Annastacia Palaszczuk smugly declared last week: “Smiles are back. Masks will no longer be required in shops, workplaces, schools and hospitality venues from 6pm on Friday 4 March.”

Announcing the slashing of public health measures, Victorian Labor Premier Daniel Andrews stated: “We’re going to a situation on Friday where there are essentially no COVID-19 rules, or so few that it’s unrecognisable to what it was a year ago.”

The critical difference is that, a year ago, there were just 72 active cases of COVID-19 in the entire country, approximately the same number of new infections recorded every five minutes yesterday.

Work from home orders have also been rescinded in NSW, Victoria and the ACT, meaning it is now up to employers whether office workers are allowed to continue working remotely.

There is substantial opposition to this drive among workers. A recent survey by consulting firm Bendelta found that 81 percent of office workers would prefer to work from home and 70 percent opposed an employer mandate on the number of days per week they are required to be in the office.

The return to offices is being heavily pushed by governments as a means to “revitalise” cities. While this is couched in terms of restoring trade to struggling cafes and other small businesses, it is really about protecting the

fortunes of commercial landlords and property developers, as well as further promoting the dangerous lie of a “return to normal.”

NSW Premier Dominic Perrottet recently stated that attending offices in-person was a “civic duty.”

Western Australian Labor Premier Mark McGowan announced yesterday that “level two” COVID-19 restrictions will be introduced on Thursday, when the state’s “hard border” is dropped.

Despite an existing surge of cases, with more than 1,000 new infections recorded each day since the four-digit milestone was reached for the first time on Friday, McGowan is proceeding with the border reopening.

The new restrictions, which mainly target home gatherings and hospitality venues, are designed to have minimal impact on business. The limited measures will do nothing to prevent a major surge in infections, illness and death when the border is reopened.

McGowan has previously said that the state’s plan is modelled on the example of South Australia. In that state, 173 people have died from COVID-19 since the domestic border was reopened on November 23.

Northern Territory (NT) Labor Chief Minister Michael Gunner said yesterday he planned to end the territory’s indoor mask mandate “sooner rather than later—like very soon.” While the territory has not set out a definite timeline for the winding back of public health measures, Gunner reiterated that QR code check-ins would soon be scaled back.

All of the territory’s 22 COVID-19 deaths have occurred in the past three months, including 20 in February. The vast majority of the victims were indigenous. While this is not reported in official figures, Central Australian Aboriginal Congress CEO Donna Ah Chee said on Australian Broadcasting Corporation radio on February 23 that 14 of the 15 deaths recorded at that time were of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Currently, 96 NT residents are hospitalised for the virus, higher than at any point before January 27, with 4 in ICU and a further 17 requiring oxygen. Around 90 percent of those hospitalised in the territory are indigenous.

The NT has the highest per capita COVID-19 infection and hospitalisation rates in the country. According to official figures, 1.78 percent of the territory population is currently infected with the virus. Over the past week, an average of 573 infections have been recorded each day, more than the total number recorded in the territory before 2022.

The surge of cases and deaths is a direct result of the NT Labor government’s opening of domestic borders on December 20.

The resumption of face-to-face teaching in schools has

been a major driver of COVID-19 infections. State education departments have released only scanty details of case numbers in schools. In NSW, more than 20,000 students and 500 educators tested positive in just the first two weeks of term one. In Victoria 18,875 students and almost 2,000 teachers tested positive in the same period.

The Committee for Public Education has compiled reports from teachers, students and parents revealing at least 862 schools have been affected. This is only a fraction of the total.

Despite the high infection numbers among schoolchildren, most of whom have not yet received two doses of COVID-19 vaccine, let alone three, the few public health measures in place in schools are rapidly being done away with.

Masks are no longer required for high school students or staff in NSW and Victoria and from next week, Queensland school students will not need to wear masks. Mandatory twice-a-week rapid antigen testing for school students in NSW has now been scrapped.

More than 700 students at the Australian National University in Canberra have tested positive for COVID-19 since an outbreak in campus residence halls began when students arrived for orientation week on February 14.

By removing the last remaining COVID-19 restrictions, Australian governments are creating the conditions for the next wave of the virus to be even more devastating than the last. The Omicron surge was itself fuelled initially by Perrottet’s removal of most restrictions on December 15, just as the new variant was beginning to take hold, together with similar measures in Victoria and elsewhere.

Students, teachers and workers must reject the false claims of the Australian and global ruling elite that the worst of the pandemic is over, or that future outbreaks are “inevitable” and must be “lived with.”

COVID-19 can and must be eliminated, but only the global working class can carry this out. Fundamentally, what is required is a fight to abolish the capitalist system, under which vital public health measures, including the shutdown of non-essential business, are blocked at every turn by the profit demands of big business.



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