

Australian governments plan to scrap COVID-19 mitigations as cases pass five million

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More than 5 million COVID-19 infections have now been recorded across Australia, with an average of over 55,000 new positive tests being recorded each day over the past week.

There are currently more than 485,000 active cases in Australia, including 257,000 in New South Wales (NSW), 64,000 in Victoria, 59,000 in Queensland, 44,000 in Western Australia, 38,000 in South Australia, 12,000 in Tasmania, 6,000 in the Australian Capital Territory and 3,100 in the Northern Territory.

Around the country, 2,941 people are hospitalised for the virus, an increase of 360 over the previous week. A total of 6,550 people have died from COVID-19, including 183 in the past week.

NSW Health Minister Brad Hazzard said on Tuesday that official infection figures in the state were “a big underestimate” and actual case numbers may be “at least 50 percent higher.” Victorian Health Minister Martin Foley warned on April 2 that the state could see “several hundred” more COVID-19 hospitalisations each day by the end of the month.

Despite these acknowledgements, Hazzard and Foley are proceeding with plans to scrap the few remaining public health measures against the virus.

As they have been all year, the NSW Liberal-National and Victorian Labor governments are in lockstep, leading the reopening drive. A spokesperson for Hazzard said last week, “Whatever decisions are being considered they will be made only after consultation with the Victorian Government to ensure coordination between the two major states.”

According to the *Age*, “senior government sources” in Victoria last week flagged the imminent removal of mask requirements for hospitality workers, primary school students and public transport users.

Both states are also considering slashing isolation rules for household close contacts. NSW Premier Dominic Perrottet said on Friday, “the faster we can get to a point where the

close contact rule is relaxed, the better.”

Perrottet’s comment followed a demand from Qantas CEO Alan Joyce for aviation workers to be exempted from isolation rules. Joyce said up to 18 percent of the airline’s workforce was currently unable to work due to COVID-19 infection or exposure.

As they did in February in relation to the slowing of the Omicron BA.1 wave, governments are hailing the “peak” of the current BA.2 surge as justification to abandon remaining mitigations.

The current claims of a peak are even more bogus than in earlier waves given the acknowledgement that infections are far higher than the official case numbers. Moreover, this entirely unscientific approach denies the role of the reopening drive in creating the conditions for ongoing waves, potentially with new and more virulent strains of the virus.

Several cases have been detected in NSW and Queensland of so-called “Deltacron,” a recombinant variant with properties of both Delta and Omicron. As soon as the infections were revealed, government officials asserted, without any evidence, that the variant was “mild” and unlikely to pose a great danger. At the very least, the detection of “Deltacron” indicates the extent to which the virus is mutating, posing the possibility that there are a host of variants already present in the community.

This is a product of the criminal response to the pandemic of all capitalist governments, which have allowed mass infection in the interests of corporate profit, thereby turning the world into a petri-dish for the development of new variants.

The arrival of the supposedly “mild” Omicron variant late last year was promoted by governments in Australia and around the world as a sign the pandemic was coming to an end. The fact that this was a complete fabrication was demonstrated clearly in Australia where 4,261 people—two-thirds of the pandemic total—have died from COVID-19 in

just the first 100 days of 2022.

The reality is, as Dr. David Berger explained his recent testimony to the Global Workers' Inquest, "There is actually no selection pressure on the virus to become less virulent. It infects people before symptoms. As long as that occurs, it doesn't matter if it kills the host."

The University of Washington's Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME) is predicting cumulative COVID-19 deaths in Australia could rise to more than 12,000 by the end of July. The modelling indicates that the reintroduction of mask mandates could reduce this to around 9,500.

New Deakin University modelling suggests 5 to 15 percent of the more than two million people infected in Australia during the first Omicron surge will suffer some form of Long COVID. The study estimated 80,000 to 325,000 people would have ongoing symptoms after three months.

While many may recover within six months, the sheer number of infections caused by the "let it rip" policies embraced by all Australian governments, Labor and Liberal-National alike, means thousands of people will face longer-lasting, potentially life-long effects.

Dr. Leonie Keall, a senior clinical neuropsychologist at Melbourne's The Alfred hospital, told the Nine network she is treating a growing number of patients with unusual symptoms months after having COVID-19.

Dr. Keall said most of her Long COVID patients are aged between 20 and 60 and suffer symptoms including "greatly reduced mental clarity," absent mindedness, fatigue and difficulty remembering words or phone numbers. She said one of her patients described the condition as "like her brain had been cut in half."

Health economist Professor Martin Hensher, who worked with the Deakin team, said: "At the moment we really have no idea of the extent of Long COVID in Australia. We are flying pretty blind."

While it is not clear how many Australian children have been or will be affected by Long COVID, the reopening of schools for face-to-face teaching has caused the infection of hundreds of thousands of students. The vast majority began the school year unvaccinated or having received only a single dose.

In NSW in the past 30 days, over 117,000 people aged 10-19 tested positive for COVID-19, almost 20 percent more than the age group with the second-highest number of positive tests. In addition, 74,000 children under ten years old tested positive.

Last Monday, 20 percent of New South Wales school students did not attend class because of COVID-19 infection or exposure. At least 20 public schools across the state were forced to cancel in-person classes because there were not

enough healthy teachers to teach them.

At countless schools, large groups of students have been herded into libraries or school halls to watch movies, allowing one teacher to supervise several classes at once. Aside from shattering any illusion that the reopening had anything to do with the educational needs of children, this practice only further accelerates the spread of the virus.

A Senate Select Committee inquiry into the pandemic delivered its final report on Thursday. Committee chair, federal Labor Senator Katy Gallagher, said the Australian government's response to the pandemic was "characterised by a failure to be prepared, a failure to take responsibility, and then a failure to get it right." Despite this, none of the 19 recommendations contained in the report called for any reversal of the "let it rip" agenda.

The committee called for a royal commission into the Australian government's response to the pandemic. Any such inquiry will be a whitewash, portraying the devastating and ongoing mass infection, illness and death as a natural disaster exacerbated by isolated "errors" or "miscalculations" by individuals.

Only an investigation by and for the global working class can expose the forces truly responsible for the pandemic, capitalist governments, including Australia's, which have enforced the demands of big business that workplaces and schools be kept open and all public health measures eliminated to prevent any impediment to profits.

The Global Workers Inquest, called by the WSWS, is providing the scientific and political foundations for the urgent task confronting the Australian and global working class, the elimination of the COVID-19 pandemic.

This requires a fight for a socialist perspective. Only under a workers' government can the subordination of health and lives to the profit demands of the financial elite be ended, and the necessary public health measures to vanquish COVID, including vaccination, mask mandates and, when needed, the shutdown of all non-essential industry, be implemented.



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