

Australian prime minister begins election campaign with a big lie on COVID

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Over the weekend, as he was calling the May 21 federal election, Prime Minister Scott Morrison released a Facebook video entitled “Why I love Australia” as a centrepiece of his campaign. In the space of just 80 seconds the video combined nauseating nationalism, Australian exceptionalist mythmaking and the worst features of the marketing industry from which Morrison hails.

Above all, Morrison’s glossy pitch presented a social reality that is unrecognisable to millions of working people.

Amid global economic turbulence, the soaring cost of living and decades-long wage stagnation, the population was purportedly enjoying the benefits of an “economic recovery” shepherded by his Liberal-National Coalition government. Precarious and low-paid work accounts for an ever-greater share of the labour market, but large numbers of young people were supposedly on track to establish successful small businesses.

The complete disconnect between Morrison’s spin and reality was summed up by his one-line reference to COVID. “Forty thousand people are alive today because of the way we managed the pandemic,” Morrison asserted.

The figure, presented without the slightest elaboration or evidence, no doubt left many scratching their heads. The *Guardian* explained that in 2020 and 2021, 0.15 percent of the population of OECD countries died of COVID. If that ratio had held in Australia, there would have been roughly 40,000 fatalities in the first two years of the pandemic.

Morrison’s dubious accountancy ignored such things as geography and demographics. But even aside from this, the obvious retort to his boast is that the government, together with the Labor Party and the whole political establishment, is doing its best to catch up with the mass illness and death that has occurred abroad.

Morrison, working with NSW Coalition Premier Dominic Perrottet and his Victorian Labor counterpart Daniel Andrews, has presided over the removal of virtually all the public health measures that limited sickness and fatalities in an earlier stage of the pandemic. Backed by the National Cabinet, composed mostly of Labor premiers, this

triumvirate “reopened” the economy, as Delta continued to spread and the highly-infectious Omicron variant arrived in the country.

Workers were forced, en masse, into unsafe workplaces. The authorities knew that hundreds of thousands would contract the deadly virus and some would become critically-ill and die. The schools were fully reopened, in defiance of expert warnings that they would become vectors for mass transmission.

The agenda animating these criminal policies—of placing profits before health and lives—was crudely summed up by Perrottet and Morrison. The former declared that he was now taking business, not health advice. The latter insisted that children needed to be sent to school so their parents could go to work. In other words, everything was to be subordinated to production and corporate money-making.

What has been the consequence? In the space of roughly four months, almost five million people have officially tested positive for the virus. But with the governments having crashed the testing system, the true toll is no doubt many times higher. It is entirely possible that the majority of the country’s 25 million people have contracted the virus, in a third of a year.

The government, Labor and the media maintain a conspiracy of silence surrounding Long COVID—a series of debilitating conditions that can afflict people for months or years, even if their infection was only “mild.” The disorder, which in some cases could last for a lifetime, can attack the heart, the brain and other vital organs.

Recent Deakin University modeling suggested that 5 to 15 percent of all people infected during Australia’s first Omicron wave could suffer Long COVID. A University of Michigan study placed the incidence of Long COVID at a staggering 43 percent of all infections.

Hundreds of thousands, or even millions, of children are being placed at risk of life-long health problems. In the past month, in NSW alone, over 117,000 people aged 10–19 tested positive for COVID-19, along with 74,000 children under 10 years old.

And what of the metric touted by Morrison and the political establishment as the only one that matters, deaths? In 2022, some 4,364 people have lost their lives to COVID in Australia, compared with 2,239 in the first two years of the pandemic. The governments and media treat the daily fatalities as non-events.

More deaths are being unleashed as the election campaign unfolds. The even more infectious BA.2 variant is leading to a new surge, with over 50,000 official infections each day, but the real number is inevitably far higher.

The University of Washington's Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation warns that Australia's cumulative COVID deaths could leap from the current to 6,600 to more than 12,000 by the end of July. The institute predicted that even the reintroduction of mask mandates could limit the toll to 9,500.

But the governments, spearheaded by Morrison, Perrottet and Andrews, are responding by doing away with the handful of restrictions that remain. They are seeking to end any close contact isolation requirements, so that business operations are not affected by "labour shortages."

The governments are demonstrating that, like their international counterparts, they are fully prepared to sacrifice lives on the altar of private profit. The attitude of Australia's political establishment is no different to British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, who infamously declared: "No more f***ing lockdowns, let the bodies pile high in their thousands."

It is true that Australia's COVID toll was less than many other countries in the first two years of the pandemic. But that was not the result of any benevolence or concern for public health on the part of the official parties. Their attitude was summed up by Morrison's crude call for people to go to the football in the opening weeks of the COVID crisis.

To the extent that governments implemented public health measures, they were forced to do so by demands from the working class, including health staff and teachers, and from principled epidemiologists. The governments instituted restrictions, including lockdowns, belatedly, begrudgingly and with a host of business exemptions. Nevertheless, the measures demonstrated that transmission could be halted and COVID eliminated.

Now, however, the entire establishment openly embraces the "let it rip" mantra, including figures such as Andrews, who was previously associated with limited public health measures. The main health section of Labor leader Anthony Albanese's website does not mention COVID! His page calling for an "Australian Centre for Disease Control" references future pandemics, not the one now spiraling out of control and claiming thousands of lives.

The experiences of the past four months demonstrate in

spades that the fight for health and lives requires a struggle against the whole parliamentary set-up and the capitalist system it defends. The big business politicians and their corporate backers are happy for millions of people to be infected and for thousands to die, in a perpetual pandemic. Their only concern is that workers remain on the job and that profits are made.

This is a future that workers cannot accept!

The Socialist Equality Party is the only party in these elections advancing a program of action for the working class to protect lives and end the pandemic. Rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions, which have enforced the "let it rip" agenda, must be established in all workplaces to impose safety measures.

This needs to be connected to a broader struggle for the repudiation of the "herd immunity" program and the adoption of scientifically-grounded measures aimed at ending transmission. These include the universal provision of high-quality N95 masks, free mass PCR testing, high-quality PPE in all workplaces, a return to online learning and the closure of non-essential businesses, with full compensation for all affected workers and small businesspeople.

Above all, the pandemic has demonstrated that the most basic needs of workers are incompatible with a society dominated by corporate profit-interest, posing the need for a socialist program. And the pandemic, an inherently global crisis, cannot be ended in a single country. It requires a unified world response, which can be developed only through the unity and collaboration of the international working class.

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