After claiming pandemic is over, Australian Labor Party leader contracts COVID-19

Martin Scott
22 April 2022

Australian Labor Party leader Anthony Albanese has tested positive for COVID-19 less than two weeks into a six-week election campaign.

Albanese's infection exposes the lies promoted by both major parties to justify the ending of public health measures and the endangerment of millions of working people in the interests of corporate profit.

Together with Prime Minister Scott Morrison, Albanese has presented the pandemic as a thing of the past, superseded by a mythical "economic recovery."

In the first election debate on Wednesday night, both were on stage maskless, in front of a similarly unprotected audience. Fittingly, the forum, at which Albanese was likely infectious, was hosted by Murdoch's Sky News, notorious for its undermining of public health and science over the past two years.

In their contributions at the debate, Morrison and Albanese said nothing about the 6,842 needless deaths from COVID-19, more than two-thirds of which have occurred since the beginning of the year. Yesterday, a further 51 deaths were reported, the highest single-day figure for more than a month and the 30th-highest since the beginning of the pandemic. Another 46 deaths were reported today.

Around the country, 3,236 people are currently hospitalised with COVID-19. According to official figures, which massively understate the spread of infection due to the conscious dismantling of testing by state and federal governments, almost 5.6 million people in Australia have contracted the virus.

The election campaign has proceeded in an utterly reckless fashion, as large contingents of politicians, staffers and journalists travel around the country for publicity stunts, with no regard for the trail of infection they will leave behind.

This election bubble, completely divorced from the hardships and concerns of working people, and from the real state of the pandemic, has burst. With Albanese's infection, reality has intruded on an unreal official campaign.

Just hours before testing positive, Albanese visited an aged care facility on the New South Wales (NSW) South Coast, meaning he may have exposed the vulnerable residents to the deadly virus. More than 2,000 aged care residents have died from COVID-19 since the start of the pandemic.

According to the *Australian Financial Review*, at least journalists in Albanese's entourage had tested positive to the virus prior to the Labor leader. It is not known how many other senior Labor politicians have been exposed.

Despite sharing the debate stage with Albanese on Wednesday night, Morrison is continuing his campaign. The prime minister contracted COVID-19 early last month and is therefore exempt from close-contact rules and not even required to test for the virus.

Media commentators have moronically stated that Morrison is not at risk due to his prior case, in wilful ignorance of the thousands of reinfections documented over the past four months. Not a single corporate pundit has voiced concern over the fact that the prime minister and his entourage may be functioning as a traveling super-spreader of the virus.

The infections are hardly surprising.

Health authorities and government figures around the country, Labor and Liberal-National alike, claim the Omicron BA.2 wave has "peaked." In fact, more than 50,000 new infections were recorded in Australia yesterday, bringing the total number of active cases to 369,910. In more than two years of the pandemic, there have been only 53 days when more people were infected.

The fact that both Albanese and Morrison have been infected in recent weeks is a clear sign that community transmission is much more widespread than the official figures indicate. Overwhelmingly, the victims are working class. Unlike Albanese and Morrison, workers in factories, warehouses, hospitals and schools have no control of their environment and can do little to protect themselves if a wave of infection sweeps through their workplace.

The catastrophic pandemic is completely off the agenda in the federal election because Labor and the Liberal-Nationals are in total agreement. The continuing crisis, along with Albanese's infection, is a direct product of the "let it rip" policies adopted by the National Cabinet and every state, territory and federal government, Labor and Liberal alike.

This is fundamentally a class question. Among workers, hardest hit by the health, economic and social impact of the pandemic, there is broad support for the elimination of the virus. But the official parties have made clear that they are

interested only in business, not health advice.

Albanese is pitching Labor to the financial elite as the only party capable of carrying out the "big reforms" demanded by big business to "boost productivity" and "build a stronger economy." This includes the overturning of any public health measures that could possibly stand in the way of corporate profits.

The decision last December by the NSW Liberal-National government to scrap density limits, mask mandates, QR code check-ins and vaccination requirements has been widely criticised as a pivotal moment that massively accelerated the devastating spread of Omicron. In reality, the continuous dismantling of public health measures around the country, while cases surged, has only been possible because of the close collaboration of Labor, particularly Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews.

On December 15, there were 6,233 cases of COVID-19 in NSW, just 3.4 percent of the 185,898 active in the state yesterday. Yet the entire political establishment, with the eager backing of the corporate media, declares the pandemic over.

The Victorian Labor and NSW Liberal-National state governments announced Wednesday that virtually all of the few remaining public health measures against COVID-19 would be scrapped.

From 6 p.m. in NSW and 11:59 p.m. in Victoria, close contacts of confirmed COVID-19 cases will no longer be required to self-isolate. The Queensland Labor government followed suit today, announcing that close-contact isolation will end from next Thursday.

In NSW and Victoria, masks will no longer be required except for on public transport, in hospitals, aged care facilities, airports and aircraft. Capacity limits for public transport and venues will be removed, and proof of vaccination will no longer be required for entry into venues in Victoria. In NSW, vaccine mandates will be removed for all workers except those in aged care and disability.

From April 30, unvaccinated international travellers will no longer be required to quarantine on arrival in NSW or Victoria. In NSW, they will be required to take a RAT within 24 hours of landing, while in Victoria, post-arrival testing will only be "recommended."

The removal of the seven-day isolation rule for close contacts was demanded by big business lobbyists because up to 20 percent of workers in many sectors were unable to work due to infection or exposure to COVID-19.

In fact, since late last year, countless industries have been granted exemptions, forcing potentially infectious workers back on the job in order to maintain company profits. Australia's unions have facilitated this reckless drive, enforcing the slashing of restrictions while cynically calling for rapid antigen tests (RATs), masks and other measures explicitly aimed at keeping factories open.

Demonstrating the role of the unions, Health Services Union (HSU) National President Gerard Hayes last week voiced his support for the removal of isolation rules, declaring: "If you are fully vaxxed, return a negative test and have no symptoms, you should be able to go to work."

This stands in complete opposition to the health workers supposedly represented by the HSU. During a NSW-wide strike on April 7, a Newcastle health worker interrupted HSU and Labor speakers at a stop-work meeting, saying: "COVID is the biggest issue here. You haven't mentioned it. We work with COVID every day, numbers of us have been sick."

Earlier this month, Qantas CEO Alan Joyce blamed the close-contact rules for chaotic scenes and major delays at the nation's airports. The NSW and Victorian governments moved swiftly to exempt aviation workers, placing staff and passengers at risk while doing nothing to resolve the congestion.

Australian Industry Group boss Innes Willox claimed: "The massively disrupted Easter for Australians wanting to travel should be a clear signal to health officials that their rules are no longer fit for purpose."

In other words, the bipartisan actions of Australian governments have created such a wave of mass infection that society cannot function. The solution demanded by business and now enacted by the Victorian, NSW and Queensland governments is to remove the few remaining measures aimed at preventing illness and pretend the pandemic is over.

The Socialist Equality Party is the only party standing in the elections demanding the immediate repudiation of the homicidal "let it rip" policies and the instatement of scientifically-grounded measures necessary to end the pandemic.

Experience has shown that this requires the intervention of the working class, against all of the official parties.

Rank-and-file committees must be formed in workplaces, schools and neighbourhoods to impose the necessary public health measures and allow workers, not management, to determine what is safe. This includes the provision of high-quality N95 masks and other personal protective equipment, free mass PCR testing, the closure of non-essential business with full compensation for workers and small-business people as well as lockdowns where necessary to eliminate transmission.

Authorised by Cheryl Crisp for the Socialist Equality Party, Suite 906, 185 Elizabeth Street, Sydney, NSW, 2000.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact