COVID-19 spread among Australian political establishment exposes pandemic lies

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26 April 2022

With Australian Labor Party leader Anthony Albanese still conducting his campaign for the May 21 federal election from isolation, further information has come to light about the spread of COVID-19 within the political and media establishment.

According to the *Australian*, at least seven journalists in the Labor media contingent contracted the virus in the first two weeks of the campaign. Yet the incursion of the deadly pandemic into the corporate media's own ranks has done nothing to reverse their relentless promotion of a "return to normal."

Senior members of the opposition leader's shadow cabinet have also been hit by the pandemic in recent weeks. Albanese told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation last Friday that Tony Burke, Kristina Keneally and Jason Clare had all been infected with COVID-19 since the federal budget announcement, less than a month ago.

The string of infections exposes the lies pushed by both major parties that the pandemic is over. This unscientific and criminal fabrication is being used to justify the ending of all COVID-19 mitigation measures in line with the profit demands of big business. Meanwhile, more than 40,000 new cases are being detected each day around the country despite declining test rates.

The outbreak also reveals the extraordinary lengths to which the political establishment will go—even if it means putting themselves and their families at risk—to promote the subordination of the health and lives of working people to corporate profit interests.

COVID-19 has killed an average of more than 40 per day in 2022, making it the second or third most common cause of death in Australia, based on pre-pandemic figures. Fifty deaths were reported yesterday, yet the pandemic is virtually absent from the nation's news headlines, except to denounce China's continued efforts to quash the virus.

Western Australian (WA) Labor Premier Mark McGowan last week tested positive for COVID-19, while his son was hospitalised for four days "in a serious condition" for the virus.

Prominent politicians, including Albanese, Liberal-National Prime Minister Scott Morrison and WA Liberal Party leader David Honey, rushed to send public messages of support for McGowan and his family on Twitter.

The "thoughts and prayers" conveyed by McGowan's colleagues are utterly cynical and entirely at odds with the complete disregard shown by the entire political establishment for the health and lives of the working class during the pandemic. In one tragic example of this, the same day McGowan's son was released from hospital, the WA health department announced that another teenager had died from COVID-19.

In line with the demands of big business and the actions of capitalist governments in every country except China, all Australian governments—state, territory and federal, Labor and Liberal-National—have deliberately let the virus rip.

As a direct result of these profit-driven policies, more than 7,000 Australians have died from COVID-19, including 4,769 since the beginning of the year. More than 5.7 million people have been infected according to official figures, which vastly understate the real spread of the virus.

In the past week, over 300,000 new infections were recorded across the country, and 262 people died. More than 3,100 people are currently hospitalised with the virus and 131 are in ICU.

The pandemic has hit hardest among the most disadvantaged sections of the working class. According to an Australian Bureau of Statistics report released last week, 35.9 percent of COVID-19 deaths occurred in the 20 percent of areas with the greatest socio-economic disadvantage. Just 9.8 percent were in the most advantaged quintile.

Immigrants to Australia have died from COVID-19 at more than 2.5 times the rate of people born in the country. Those born in the Middle East died at almost nine times the overall rate.

The same report found that at least 42 people have died in Australia from Long COVID, raising the spectre of the long-term ramifications of mass infection.

The deadly consequences of the reckless "let it rip"

policies are perhaps most exposed in McGowan's own state. Like all Australian governments, the WA administration implemented lockdown and safety measures early in the pandemic following demands from key sections of the working class, including health workers and teachers. As a result, the virus was effectively eliminated from the state.

With most of the population isolated from the rest of the country by vast stretches of desert, and exemptions granted to the mining corporations which dominate the state's economy, the WA government was able to maintain strict border controls throughout much of the first two years of the pandemic.

Labor was returned to office with a landslide victory in the March 2021 election, which demonstrated the mass popular support for the public health measures and the relatively "normal" life enjoyed by WA residents. McGowan promised to continue to keep the population safe from COVID-19, while the Liberal opposition vowed to tear down the "hard border."

In fact, less that one year later, the McGowan government followed the lead of the other state and territory governments and threw open the WA border.

Up until the end of last year, WA had recorded just 1,158 COVID-19 infections and 9 deaths. Not a single death was recorded between May 3, 2020 and February 11 2022. Since the border was reopened on March 3, more than 330,000 people have contracted the virus in WA and 107 have died.

Despite the rapidly mounting toll of infection, illness and death, and the impact on McGowan himself, the WA government yesterday announced the further easing of public health measures in line with the ending of restrictions announced last week in New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland and South Australia.

From today in WA, asymptomatic close contacts of confirmed COVID-19 cases are no longer required to self-isolate. Masks no longer must be worn except in "high-risk settings" including health and aged care facilities and public transport. Venue capacity limits have been abandoned.

In the Australian Capital Territory, the Labor government yesterday ended the requirement for close contacts to isolate, on the same day the territory recorded its second-highest number of COVID-19 hospitalisations.

Mask mandates have now been abolished in all Australian states and territories, while only Tasmania maintains venue capacity limits and a requirement for all close contacts to self-isolate.

The destruction of public health measures throughout the country by Labor and Liberal-National governments alike makes clear that, as long as the capitalist parties are in control, the working class will be subjected to the ongoing threat of the deadly virus.

The Socialist Equality Party is the only party putting forward a perspective to end the pandemic. None of the problems confronting workers, including declining wages, rapidly rising inflation, or the crumbling and long-neglected public health and education systems, can be resolved without a fight to eliminate COVID-19, in Australia and globally.

This requires workers to take matters into their own hands. Rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions, must be formed in every workplace, neighbourhood and school to impose the necessary safety measures to shut down transmission of the virus.

Through a network of these committees, workers can take up a fight against the "let it rip" agenda of the ruling elite and for the adoption of public health measures based on the best available science. 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 business people.

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