

Australia: Labor and the Coalition in lockstep as COVID-19 infection toll passes six million

Jason Wardle, Socialist Equality Party candidate for the Senate in Victoria
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Australia's federal election features an almost total blackout by the major parties and the corporate press on the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

The political establishment is silent for two reasons: First, any mention of the actual situation would completely shatter the lies, pushed by Labor, the Coalition and the media, that the pandemic is over. Second, there is not a hair's breadth between the "let it rip" policies of all the parliamentary parties.

This homicidal program has proceeded without the slightest opposition from the Greens. In a National Press Club address last month, Greens leader Adam Bandt did not even mention the pandemic. The party's COVID-19 "plan" is limited to calls for free rapid antigen tests (RATs), improved ventilation in schools and investment in vaccine research. These minimally effective mitigations are designed not to interfere with corporate profits.

Along with their counterparts in every country, except China, Australian governments have responded to the mounting toll of infection, illness and death by removing virtually every public health measure previously implemented to suppress the pandemic.

Even the most basic methods of infection control, quarantine and isolation, which have been understood and practised for centuries, have been abandoned in line with the demands of big business.

Together, Australia's state, territory and federal governments, Labor and Liberal-National alike, are responsible for the devastating spread of COVID-19. The virus has already killed 7,552 people in Australia, and infected more than 6.3 million, almost a quarter of the population.

In January alone, 1,519 COVID-19 deaths were reported—49 per day, making it the leading cause of death, ahead of ischaemic heart disease. A report released by the Australian Bureau of Statistics revealed that 2,865 excess deaths (22.6 percent) occurred in January, meaning the real health impact of the virus was far worse than officially recorded.

With hospitals and ambulance services in crisis, hundreds of people died from conditions that would have otherwise been treatable. There were 486 deaths from diabetes in January, 38.1 percent higher than average. Deaths from dementia were 29.2 percent higher than average.

The ruling class and its representatives in the major parties and the media insist we must "live with the virus." What this really means for workers is endless waves of mass illness and the normalisation of preventable death, in order to keep the wheels of industry turning and profits flowing into the coffers of the wealthy elite.

The working class cannot accept this murderous outlook. The COVID-19 pandemic can and must be eliminated.

End the pandemic!

This global health crisis cannot be resolved within the framework of capitalism. The subordination of human health and lives to the profit interests of big business is a stark expression of the exploitation and oppression of the working class upon which the capitalist economy is built.

The Socialist Equality Party is the only party in this election advancing a program of action for the working class to protect lives and end the pandemic. This will require the formation of new organisations of struggle, completely independent of the major parties and the trade unions. Rank-and-file committees must be established in all workplaces, schools and neighbourhoods to impose the safety measures necessary to shut down transmission of the virus.

While the ruling class claims elimination, or even suppression, of COVID-19 is impossible, the experience of the earlier stages of the pandemic makes clear that this is false. Under pressure from workers, young people and epidemiologists, Australian governments were compelled to implement public health measures, including lockdowns. As belated and limited as these were, they succeeded in suppressing transmission of the virus in every state and territory.

In late 2021 however, Labor and Liberal-National governments alike, working through the Labor-majority "National Cabinet," shifted to the profit-driven program of "living with the virus." This was sold to workers on the fraudulent basis that vaccination alone would prevent the already growing wave of severe illness and death.

With the emergence of the Omicron variant in November, an outright program of "herd immunity" was adopted, as politicians peddled the lie that mass infection with the supposedly "mild" variant would end the pandemic.

In fact, since the start of 2022, more than 5.9 million people have contracted COVID-19 in Australia, and 5,252 have died, according to official figures. The abandonment of public health measures during the first Omicron wave set the stage for the next, in which Omicron sub-variant BA.2 dominated. New sub-variants, including BA.4 and BA.5, have now been detected in Australia, creating the conditions for another surge within weeks.

The emergence of these new variants, an inevitable product of governments around the world allowing the virus to run rampant, greatly increases the risk of reinfection. In New South Wales (NSW), 11,309 people have been infected two or more times, 45 percent since late November, while in Victoria, around 10,000 reinfections were recorded between late December and the end of March.

Only 52.5 percent of Australians have received a third dose of

COVID-19 vaccine, and 67.1 percent of second doses were administered more than six months ago and therefore offer little to no protection against the deadly virus.

From late January, teachers and children, the majority of whom were not fully vaccinated, were herded back into the country's classrooms. The express purpose of this was to force parents back into the factories, warehouses, shops and offices.

Labor and the unions suppress opposition

This was carried out through the close collaboration of Liberal-National NSW Premier Dominic Perrottet and Victorian Labor Premier Daniel Andrews. The pair hatched a plan to implement identical back-to-school policies. Andrews, associated with limited lockdown measures in earlier stages of the pandemic, provided political cover to hose down the objections of parents, educators and principled epidemiologists.

As a result, hundreds of thousands of children and teachers have become infected with COVID-19. At least one teacher has died. Health and education departments have covered up the spread of the virus in schools, but some figures have been revealed.

In just the first two weeks of the school year, almost 39,000 students and 2,500 teachers in NSW and Victoria tested positive for COVID-19. In NSW, between March 21 and March 25, at least 80,000 more students were absent from public schools than usual.

At least 393,734 children and teenagers have tested positive for COVID-19 since February 1. The real total is far higher though, as age-specific data is only available for polymerase chain reaction (PCR) test results, so positive RAT results—more than half of all confirmed cases—are not included in that age calculation.

None of this would have been possible without the eager assistance of the unions, which enforced the reopening and have suppressed all opposition of teachers to the dangerous conditions in schools.

Unions covering health workers have likewise ensured COVID-19 is hardly mentioned, despite the continuing catastrophe in the country's woefully under-resourced public hospitals. Even when forced by the palpable anger and frustration of workers to call strikes, the unions have ensured the deadly virus is kept off the agenda.

Australia's unions have consistently railed against lockdowns and cheered the tearing down of public health measures. In July 2021, the unions, together with big business lobbyists, demanded exemptions in virtually every industry to partial lockdown measures introduced in NSW, forcing workers to stay on the job. This risked the health and lives of workers and their families and contributed to the rapid spread of the virus throughout Sydney and beyond, in what was at that time Australia's largest outbreak.

In October, the Australian Council of Trade Unions joined with business groups to call for a publicly-funded program to supply RATs to businesses, to avoid "snap closures" in a "new phase of living with the virus."

Since late December, unions have enforced the slashing of close contact isolation rules in countless industries, forcing potentially infectious workers back to work to infect their colleagues. Now, this policy has been applied across the board, so there is no longer any requirement for close contacts to isolate, or in some states, even to take a test.

Throughout the pandemic, the class orientation and role of the unions has been on stark display. These fetid organisations exist to enforce the demands of big business and government, and have demonstrated that they will do so, even if it leads to mass illness and death in the working class.

The SEP's program of action

Whichever party forms government after the May 21 election, the murderous "let it rip" policy will continue. This makes clear that the working class must take matters into its own hands.

The SEP is advancing a program of action for the working class to fight COVID-19, which includes the following demands:

- Mandatory public health measures in every workplace to help stamp out COVID, including the provision of free N95 masks and PCR tests.
- Workers not management must decide what is safe.
- Reinstitute contact tracing, expand isolation and treatment and lockdown of areas of high infection to stop the spread of the virus.

The first step to implementing these demands is the formation of rank-and-file committees in every workplace, school and neighbourhood. Through an interconnected network of these committees, workers can join the global fight to eliminate COVID-19, a perspective advanced solely by the International Committee of the Fourth International and the *World Socialist Web Site*.

Above all, what is required is a fight for socialism, under which the health and lives of working-class people will no longer be subordinated to the profit interests of the wealthy few.

Contact the SEP:

Phone: (02) 8218 3222

Email: sep@sep.org.au

Facebook: [SocialistEqualityPartyAustralia](https://www.facebook.com/SocialistEqualityPartyAustralia)

Twitter: [@SEP_Australia](https://twitter.com/SEP_Australia)

Instagram: [socialistequalityparty_au](https://www.instagram.com/socialistequalityparty_au)

TikTok: [@SEP_Australia](https://www.tiktok.com/@SEP_Australia)

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



To contact the WWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)