

As new COVID surge begins in Australia, Labor government declares public health restrictions a thing of the past

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By every metric, the coronavirus pandemic in Australia is the worst it has been, except for the absolute peak of an Omicron tsunami that swept across the country in December–January. Infections, hospitalisations and deaths are once again approaching record levels, as the highly-infectious BA.4 and BA.5 variants of Omicron take hold.

Under these conditions, the newly-elected federal Labor government has made clear that it will continue the “let it rip” program adopted last December. The profit-driven policies, involving the withdrawal of public health measures that limited infections and deaths during the first two years of the pandemic, mean that the population is at the mercy of continuous surges of the virus.

Speaking to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) this morning, Labor Health Minister Mark Butler stated that the country had “moved beyond” coordinated public health measures. “The message is ‘take responsibility, make your own choice,’” Butler said. “We’re deep into the third year of the pandemic and we need to make sure that people feel they’re able to take control of their own circumstances.”

The line is identical to that of the previous Liberal-National government of Prime Minister Scott Morrison.

Even as Labor acknowledges that infections and illnesses will rise over the coming weeks, it is insisting that no measures will be taken that impact upon big business. In the first instance, this means ensuring that the schools and workplaces remain open, no matter what, so that workers remain on the job and full profit-making operations continue.

Not only did Butler rule out lockdown measures, he also ruled out any broader mask mandates. Most state and territory administrations, Labor and Liberal alike, have removed such mandates, even in airport terminals and crowded indoor locations. They remain in place only on public transport, where they are not enforced, and in the hospitals.

The rejection of this most basic form of infection control has no scientific basis. The population has been encouraged to dispense with masks solely because they are a reminder that the pandemic continues and their continued presence could limit economic activity, such as retail shopping.

The ABC interviewer pointedly asked Butler if his position meant “sitting back and accepting” rising death and illness. Butler said his government would boost the hospital system and expand vaccine access, including by rolling out a fourth booster shot, which has previously been limited to those aged over 65 and the immunocompromised.

At the first meeting of the “National Cabinet” after the election, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese last month ruled out any increase to hospital funding. He extended the federal pandemic healthcare funding by only six months.

Butler’s reference to vaccination was equally duplicitous. The new Omicron variants have substantial vaccine-evading properties. While immunisation is crucial, the COVID surge of the past seven months has demonstrated that, separated from broader public health measures, it cannot end illness and death alone.

Butler’s comments came just days after Australia’s total COVID death toll exceeded 10,000. All but 2,239 of those fatalities have occurred this year. Average daily deaths remain over 40, equating to 300 or more a week, almost as high as at any time before.

Hospitalisations are rising rapidly, signalling that deaths will also increase. As of today, there are 3,982 COVID patients in hospitals across the country. That compares with 2,967 on June 24, and the recent low of 1,655 on March 12.

Medical experts are warning that the healthcare system is already at breaking point, with mounting COVID admissions compounded by influenza and other seasonal ailments.

Chris Moy, vice-president of the Australian Medical Association, told the *Guardian* yesterday that hospital overcrowding is the worst he has seen.

“It’s pretty desperate,” Moy stated. “They are as full as

they ever have been. Everybody is telling me it's horrific. It's winter, and there's the flu, but they're also seeing a lot of mental health patients at the moment. Covid is adding an extra layer."

University of South Australia Professor of Biostatistics Adrian Esterman added: "We are seeing a very steep increase in case numbers. Should we be worried? Yes, because the health system is under enormous pressure right now."

Esterman noted that the hospital crisis extended across all states and territories: "There's the usual problem with bed blockages. They can't get people out of acute care, or from the ED [emergency department] to acute care, or from the ambulance to ED, so a lot of capital cities have ambulance ramping."

The increasing hospitalisations indicate a major rise in infection numbers. The extent of the spread, however, is entirely unknown because all governments have dismantled the polymerase chain reaction (PCR) testing system. Instead, cases are primarily self-reported by individuals who are responsible for administering their own, less reliable, rapid antigen tests.

According to the official case numbers, there are on average roughly 33,000 infections per day. Case numbers exceeded 40,000 on both Wednesday and Thursday for the first time since late May. Experts, however, state that the real number of infections is at least double the number that are being identified. That means Australia could already have 100,000 or more infections per day, a tally approaching the December–January explosion of cases.

Almost all state and territory administrations have acknowledged that case numbers will increase, even as they reject any measures to halt the spread.

In Queensland, there are more than 2,000 health workers furloughed at any one time due to infection or exposure. Overall hospitalisations have increased in the state by 140 percent over the past month. Queensland Labor government Chief Health Officer John Gerrard warned this week that hospitalisations were "likely to be at least as bad as the first wave in January."

Gerrard, however, declared that he was not in favour of an indoor mask mandate. Such a measure would be "divisive" and "not helpful," because "these waves are likely to continue off and on every few months for some time to come, it could be years." Instead, the Labor government is discussing suspending elective and other non-urgent health procedures.

In New South Wales, Chief Health Officer Dr Kerry Chant encouraged people to wear masks indoors, while the state's Health Minister Brad Hazzard flatly ruled out any mandate.

Under these conditions, the announcement yesterday of an

expanded fourth booster dose is aimed at placating growing concerns over the surge, and justifying the refusal to institute other public health measures.

For weeks, the Australian Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation (ATAGI) and the federal Labor government stonewalled increasingly urgent demands from medical experts for the fourth shot to be made available. This means that the rollout will not begin until the new surge is well and truly underway.

Third-dose booster rates, moreover, have stalled for months. Only 67 percent of the adult population has received a third shot. That is the result of the vaccination campaign having been wound back since early this year, and the continuous barrage of official misinformation proclaiming the pandemic over.

Those with only two doses of vaccine have virtually no protection against the new, virulent strains of Omicron. ATAGI noted that the efficacy of the third shot, "waned over the course of several weeks."

While it trumpeted ATAGI's recommendation for a fourth dose, the Labor government was silent on a key passage in the statement from the immunisation authority permitting the measure. It explained:

"However, the impact of this expanded vaccine booster recommendation alone is expected to be limited. ATAGI advises that other public health and social measures, in addition to vaccination, will have the greatest impact against the Omicron BA.4 and BA.5 surge in infections."

It is precisely those "other public health and social measures" that the capitalist political establishment, including the federal Labor government, have rejected.



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