

Australian government forced to reinstate “pandemic leave” as COVID-19 infections and deaths soar

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Amid a rapidly worsening pandemic disaster, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese announced today that the Labor government will temporarily reinstate meagre pandemic leave payments for those infected with, or exposed to, COVID-19.

At a meeting of the “National Cabinet” this morning, the same federal, state and territory leaders who have axed virtually all pandemic safety measures, allowing the virus to mutate, agreed to a 50-50 split for the reintroduced payments, which will be terminated again on September 30.

The payments, established by the former Liberal-National government, expired on June 30, provoking criticism of the federal Labor government by big business as well as anger among workers because of a massive surge in infections, hospitalisation and death, fuelled by the official profit-driven refusal to take any action to eliminate COVID-19.

Throughout the week, the Labor government had adamantly defended the scrapping of the payments, along with another of the few remaining scraps of pandemic policy, the provision of free rapid antigen tests (RATs) to pensioners and welfare recipients, over the objections of health authorities and medical experts.

Australian Medical Association president Omar Khorsid said: “The last thing you need when you have such huge numbers of cases around is for the government to pull its supports for people to do the right thing.”

Today’s decision by the “National Cabinet” has nothing to do with criticism from health experts, however. It is primarily a response to the demands of business groups, which complained that the rapid growth of infections was exacerbating staff shortages throughout the supply chain.

Having ruthlessly demanded the axing of public health measures, the corporate elite now hopes that publicly-funded pandemic leave payments will limit the decimation of workforces through COVID-19 infection, while allowing employers to continue to refuse paid sick leave for workers.

Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry chief

Andrew McKellar said: “The last thing we need is an uncontrollable spread of illness that would put even more pressure on businesses already struggling with labour shortages.”

The real effect of the payment is to subsidise the dangerous operations of the same corporate interests that bear chief responsibility for the crisis itself. Increasingly throughout the pandemic, health policy has been dictated by big business, which has opposed mask mandates, lockdowns and other essential measures, allowing COVID-19 to run rampant.

The trade unions have been entirely complicit, ensuring workers remained on the job throughout the pandemic, whatever the danger, and opposing calls to shut down production.

Fully-paid pandemic leave, not just the \$750 weekly allowances, is essential to keep infected workers out of financial straits and reduce the pressure on them to keep working, inevitably spreading the virus to their colleagues.

Under conditions where access to accurate polymerase chain reaction (PCR) testing has been slashed, infected people also have to resort to unreliable RATs to access potentially life-saving anti-viral treatments, and avoid spreading the virus to others. What remains of the free RAT program will now be left up to the states and territories, however.

The escalating COVID crisis is a direct result of the “let it rip” policies embraced by all Australian governments. While these homicidal policies are commonly associated with former Liberal-National Prime Minister Scott Morrison, Labor governments at state and federal level are now leading the charge.

Federal Health Minister Mark Butler declared on Wednesday: “There are going to be millions of people infected by COVID in this coming few weeks.” Butler has not called for a single measure to end the wave of infection. Throughout the week he refused to even extend pandemic

leave payments and the free RAT program, insisting on the need for “fiscal responsibility.”

On Tuesday, Labor’s Victorian Health Minister Mary-Anne Thomas announced she had defied the recommendation of the state’s Chief Health Officer to implement a mask mandate, because it conflicted with the demands of big business.

Victoria has seen a 91 percent increase in hospitalisation over the past three weeks, with more than 800 people currently being treated for COVID-19, for the first time since February 2. Numerous hospitals across the state have been forced to cancel elective surgeries as a result of the influx of COVID-19 patients and growing staff shortages due to infection.

Labor Premier of Western Australia (WA) Mark McGowan said on Thursday he would not set “hard and fast rules,” but “continue to monitor the situation.” The “situation” is that there are more than 35,000 active cases in the state and 333 people are hospitalised for COVID-19, the highest number during the pandemic.

McGowan was previously associated with maintaining a “hard border” that helped suppress COVID-19 in the state for almost two years. There was not a single COVID-19 death in the state between May 4, 2020 and February 2, 2022.

State governments are still slashing the few remaining restrictions. In Tasmania, mandated mask-wearing in health facilities was dropped on June 30. Since then, COVID-19 hospitalisations in the state have more than tripled to 138, far in excess of previous highs.

Governments are increasingly adopting the program of the extreme right: No lockdowns, no masks and no vaccine requirements.

In NSW, unvaccinated teachers will be allowed to return to work from Monday, while aged care facilities in the state will remove limits on visitor numbers and the requirement for visitors to be vaccinated.

Since December 16, 2021, despite 90 percent of people over the age of 16 having had two vaccine doses, 8.5 million infections have been reported in Australia and 8,533 people have died from COVID-19.

In NSW, in the week ending July 10, 59.4 percent of people hospitalised for COVID-19 had received at least three shots, close to the state’s three-dose vaccination rate of 64.8 percent. This reflects the minimal protection the vaccines afford against the now dominant Omicron BA.4 and BA.5 variants.

The refusal of capitalist governments throughout the world, with the exception of China, to suppress transmission of the virus continues to create the conditions for the development of new, more contagious and vaccine-evading

variants.

More than 40,000 new infections are being reported each day across Australia, and the real figure is likely twice as high, according to health experts. There are 4,719 COVID-19 patients in hospitals, the highest number since February 2.

In the past week, 358 people have died from the virus, an average of more than 51 per day. Based on 2019 figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics, this would make COVID-19 the leading cause of death in Australia, ahead of ischaemic heart diseases.

There have been at least 3,104 COVID-19 deaths in aged care since the start of the pandemic, including more than 2,187 this year and 132 in the past week.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, almost 67,000 aged care residents and 49,000 staff have been infected. Yesterday, there were 7,947 active COVID-19 cases in 857 ongoing outbreaks in residential aged care facilities.

Far from pouring in the necessary resources, Federal Aged Care Minister Anika Wells confirmed this week that a six-month deployment of 1,700 Australian Defence Force personnel to cover staff shortages in sector will end on August 12.

The refusal of all Australian governments, spearheaded by Albanese, to follow the advice of health experts guarantees that this horrific situation will worsen.

The working class cannot leave their health and lives in the hands of a ruling elite that is utterly unconcerned by the loss of more than 50 lives each day, as long as nothing stands in the way of corporate profits.

Workers must oppose this policy of mass infection and take up a fight for the elimination of COVID-19. This will require a break with Labor and the trade unions and the formation of rank-and-file committees in workplaces, schools and neighbourhoods, so that workers can take matters into their own hands.



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