

Australian ruling class demands governments “stand firm” against safety measures as COVID-19 toll explodes

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25 July 2022

Australia's COVID-19 crisis passed another terrible milestone last week: over 11,000 people have now died, up from just 2,200 at the end of 2021.

An inverse political law has emerged. The more catastrophic the pandemic—as a direct result of the profit-driven “live with the virus” campaign—the more the Australian capitalist class demands the ending of public health precautions. And the more the trade unions enforce this deadly offensive.

So too, the greater become efforts to silence denunciations of the “let it rip” disaster. That is demonstrated by Twitter’s locking of the Socialist Equality Party (Australia)’s account over a video defending Dr David Berger and two other victimised zero-COVID campaigners, Lisa Dias and David O’Sullivan, as well as Julian Assange, persecuted for exposing US and allied war crimes.

This pattern has become more blatant in recent days as the Labor government presides over a mounting wave of infections, hospitalisations, deaths and long-COVID affliction.

Because of the axing of virtually all safety measures by governments, Labor and Liberal-National alike, since the end of last year, total cases have soared from 400,000 to a staggering nine million, and the highly transmissible BA.4 and BA.5 variants are now fuelling a new Omicron tsunami.

More than 324,000 new infections were reported last week and 450 deaths. Daily death and hospitalisation numbers are reaching the record highs suffered in January. On Saturday, the daily number of deaths hit 102.

Public hospitals are being overwhelmed. Their workers are under intolerable strain and patients are in great danger. The number of hospital beds occupied by COVID-19 patients has almost doubled from fewer than 3,000 in June to 5,437, above the previous peak of 5,390 on January 25.

At a press conference last week, Health Minister Mark Butler and the country’s Chief Medical Officer Paul Kelly admitted that “millions” more Australians would be infected

over the coming weeks. Yet they opposed the reintroduction of any public safety measures.

As far as the ruling class and its political servants are concerned, nothing must be done to protect the population, especially working-class households, that will in any way affect the full reopening of workplaces and business operations in order to drive up profits.

That message was spelt out most vehemently by the *Australian* in an editorial on July 20. “Governments must stand firm against any push for a return to mandatory Covid-19 controls on schools and workplaces,” it declared.

This was another “test” for Prime Minister Anthony Albanese’s government. In fact, the Murdoch media’s national flagship berated the government for backing down on terminating the small one-off \$750 payments to infected workers who have to take time off work.

“Citizens must be allowed to determine their own level of risk,” the editorial demanded. This invocation of “individual responsibility” not only denies the necessity for a societal response to the COVID disaster. People are systematically being kept in the dark about the “level of risk.” Governments and the media are burying the infection toll, scrapping testing and tracing, covering up the serious effects of the coronavirus and trying to silence health experts.

The editorial even denounced the state Labor government in Victoria for recommending, but not requiring, that schoolchildren wear masks in classrooms. This was “a backward step.” It was all the more reprehensible because the government had revived the “excuse” of following health advice after flatly rejecting it earlier.

That was a reference to Victorian Health Minister Mary-Anne Thomas boasting the previous week that following “the opportunity to consult with business leaders,” she dismissed the state chief health officer’s recommendation to reintroduce an indoor mask mandate.

The *Australian Financial Review*’s July 23 editorial reinforced the dictates of business. It insisted there was “no

case—and no support—for a return to lockdowns. Even this omicron resurgence simply does not warrant it.”

Blithely, the financial newspaper claimed: “The health system is not collapsing.” In reality, more than 10,000 health workers are isolating because of infection. There are massive staff shortages and exhausting extended shifts and workloads. Patients face life-threatening delays in treatment.

The stench of eugenics wafted from the editorial. “COVID-19 has become a silent killer that largely stalks the old, like the heart disease that’s all around us,” it stated. In other words, the deaths of older people—no longer wanted as workers and a burden on the health and pensions systems—are of little or no concern.

Above all, there must be no going back to working from home, because “fragmented and atomised workforces are not effective in the long run.”

Cynically, the AFR noted: “The current daily average virus death toll of 60 would have caused waves of panic back in the time of daily press conferences by premiers. Now these individual tragedies pass with little public notice or drama.”

What the AFR derides as “panic,” is the widespread, continuing and absolutely justified popular concern over all the unnecessary deaths throughout the pandemic. What has changed this year is that the governments and the corporate media have deliberately shut down reporting on the deaths.

Previous official pretences of condolences have been dropped. Hundreds of loved ones now die every week without even a mention, let alone any acknowledgement of their lives. They have been made nameless and invisible.

On cue, the Labor government has followed its instructions. Asked last Thursday why he opposed reintroducing mask mandates, Albanese alleged there were low levels of compliance with existing mandates, including on public transport, where no enforcement is occurring.

His government, like its Liberal-National predecessor, is trying to blame working people for the disastrous conditions that governments, the media and the corporate elite have consciously created.

The unions are helping Labor suppress workers’ demands for protection. Having enforced returns to workplaces and schools throughout the pandemic, they moved last week to stifle opposition to employers’ threats of disciplinary action or dismissal against workers who want to work from home for their safety.

Health Services Union national president Gerard Hayes sided openly with Albanese, who said last week that working from home was a decision for employers, not workers or public health orders. Working from home would damage the economy, Hayes declared, while claiming,

without evidence, that it would hurt mental health and the vaccination program.

That is in line with the role of all the health unions. They have confined their members to one-off strikes and protests despite the refusal of the state and federal governments to meet their crucial demands for more staff, safe patient-to-staff ratios and wage rises to cope with the cost of living crisis.

Hayes opposed a suggestion from the Finance Sector Union (FSU) that industrial agreements should allow workers to negotiate work from home arrangements with their bosses. This suggestion itself left the issue up to the requirements of the management, while offering a safety valve to head off the hostility of workers to being exposed to unsafe offices and other workplaces.

Supporting the FSU call, Australian Council of Trade Unions secretary Sally McManus underscored the unions’ pro-business agenda. She said working from home would boost productivity, while reducing stress and living expenses, such as petrol. At the same time, she backed employer objections that face-to-face contact was important for their operations. “I don’t think it’s good to have a one-size fits all (approach) … there should be options for it,” McManus said.

Workers and young people cannot leave their health and lives in the hands of the ruling class, its governments and the unions, which are all intent on protecting corporate profits, regardless of the human cost.

To oppose this policy of mass infection, and fight for the measures that can eliminate COVID-19, they need to form rank-and-file committees in workplaces, schools and neighbourhoods, to take matters into their own hands. This struggle requires a socialist perspective, based on the defence of lives and livelihoods, not the fortunes of the super-rich.



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