

Australia: More than 3,000 COVID-19 deaths in residential aged care this year

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Recent federal government health data has revealed that more than 3,000 Australians have died from COVID-19 in residential aged care facilities since January 1. The total number of deaths in aged care has quadrupled, from 967 to 3,981, since the lifting of public health measures last December.

In total, more than 91,600 COVID-19 cases have been recorded in aged care residents and 59,800 cases among staff. Before January 7, just 5,017 residents and 4,912 staff had been infected.

More than 1,200 residents and 400 workers are currently infected with COVID-19, with active outbreaks at 270 aged care facilities across the country. The majority of these are in NSW (97) and Victoria (75), followed by Queensland (36), South Australia (28) and Western Australia (23).

These figures expose the Labor Party's federal election campaign promise to bring "dignity, quality and humanity back into aged care" as an utter fraud. Since the May 21 election of Anthony Albanese's federal Labor government, more than 1,500 aged care residents have died from COVID-19.

As the death toll has mounted, the Labor government has deepened the homicidal "let it rip" response to the pandemic adopted by all state, territory and federal governments, Labor and Liberal-National alike.

The wave of illness and death that is being inflicted on the population is the result of a conscious and deliberate policy. Virtually all public health measures to mitigate the spread of the virus have been removed, including the ending of mask mandates in most indoor environments and the slashing of the isolation period for those infected from seven to five days.

These moves have no scientific or health justification, but are instead motivated by the demands of big business and the financial press that there can be no

interruption to the flow of corporate profits.

Since September 9, reporting of COVID-19 infections, hospitalisations and deaths has been reduced from daily to weekly in every state and territory except Victoria. This is a clear attempt to cover-up the extent of the spread of COVID-19 in order to reinforce the lie that the pandemic is over.

In reality, August was the deadliest month of the pandemic in Australia so far, with 2,056 COVID-19 deaths recorded—the first time 2,000 deaths had been exceeded within a month. More than 12,000 deaths have been recorded in 2022 alone.

The attitude of the ruling class to the crisis in aged care was expressed in the remarks of Chief Medical Officer Paul Kelly in July, when he described the thousands of coronavirus deaths of elderly people as a delayed "reaping" after the first eighteen months of the pandemic, during which COVID-19 rates were relatively low and influenza virtually non-existent.

This amounts to a deliberate culling of the most vulnerable in the population, the elderly, frail and sick, whom the financial and ruling elite deems "unproductive."

Despite the vulnerability of aged care residents and staff to contracting the virus, workers have told the *World Socialist Web Site* that N95/P2 respirator and eye protection requirements are being dropped in those facilities where such measures were implemented. Staff report being provided only with surgical masks, which are inadequate to prevent airborne transmission, unless they specifically request N95 masks.

In July, the number of active COVID-19 cases among aged care workers doubled from 1,730 on July 1 to 3,546. Between March 24 and August 26, the number of active COVID cases among aged care staff did not drop below 1,000.

With a large number of staff unable to work due to COVID infection or exposure, aged care workers have faced increasingly brutal workloads, under conditions where there was already chronic understaffing prior to the pandemic.

In the last two weeks of July, when staffing shortages were at their highest, Defence Minister Richard Marles announced that the provision of “up to 250” Australian Defence Force (ADF) personnel to the sector would be extended. However, the government’s weekly surge workforce figures have shown that, on average, just 30 ADF personnel were working in aged care each week across the country since the announcement.

The deployment of military personnel, with no specific training or experience in aged care, was never going to resolve the crisis in the sector. Instead, it was a cynical ploy to create the impression that the federal government was managing the disaster and shut down opposition to the mass infection of the population.

The federal government’s plan to require aged care facilities to have at least one registered nurse on duty at all times, will, if legislated, not be enforced until October 2023. This will do nothing to alleviate the staffing crisis. With no set nurse-to-patient ratios, this could leave a single registered nurse responsible for the care of hundreds of residents each shift.

From October 2023, aged care facilities will be required to provide aged care residents with 200 “care minutes” each day, but federal funding will be increased by just \$30 to \$225 per resident per day. According to analysis by the StewartBrown accountancy firm, annual wage increases, rising inflation and mandated “care minutes” will increase the cost of resident care to \$231.81 per person per day.

The pandemic has exacerbated a decades-long crisis in aged care. Numerous government reports and inquiries have demonstrated the abysmal conditions in aged care, including staffing shortages, lack of trained staff and inadequate resources. Aged care residents frequently suffer malnutrition, dehydration, untreated sores and infections and social isolation.

The deepening privatisation and funding cuts to public health and aged care, carried out by successive governments, Labor and Liberal-National alike, have meant that the needs of the elderly are subordinated to the profit requirements of the corporate and financial elite.

The unions, including the health unions, have worked hand-in-glove with governments and corporations to enforce this agenda, facilitating cost-cutting through enterprise bargaining agreements and suppressing the opposition of aged care workers to the growing assault.

The unions have fully endorsed the profit-driven reopening at every stage of the pandemic. Last month, Health Services Union national president Gerard Hayes, echoing the demands of business, declared that mandatory isolation should be entirely scrapped, in order to push infected workers back into workplaces. This followed his rejection of work-from-home arrangements for workers who could do so, on the basis that this would risk the economy.

There is growing anger and opposition among health workers, including those in aged care, to increasingly impossible living and working conditions. There have been strikes and protests by health workers across Australia this year. However, the unions have isolated and limited these actions, shutting them down without workers’ demands being met.

To take forward the fight to end the pandemic and for safe staffing, working conditions and a decent wage, workers must take matters into their own hands. Rank-and-file committees, completely independent of the unions, are necessary to unite the struggles of health workers and take control out of the hands of the union bureaucracy.

The experience of the pandemic has laid bare the reality that the capitalist profit system can offer no solution to a crisis that threatens the lives and wellbeing of the vast majority of the population. The catastrophe in aged care poses the need for a socialist perspective aimed at reorganising society to meet social need, not private profit.



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