

Australia ends COVID isolation requirements: Business hails “freedom,” medical experts warn of mass deaths

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In a major attack on public health, Australia’s governments yesterday ended requirements for those infected with COVID-19 to isolate themselves from the community. All federal pandemic leave payments for COVID-positive workers are also being ended.

The twin measures, which come into effect on October 14, are the final stage in a protracted onslaught on any coordinated public health response to the pandemic. They mean that COVID will be allowed to circulate everywhere, the pandemic will go on indefinitely and workers infected with a potentially deadly illness will be forced to stay on the job.

Significantly, this attack, which amounts to a declaration of war on public health and the rights of working people, has been spearheaded by the federal Labor government. Its prime minister, Anthony Albanese, is imposing profit-driven and homicidal policies that his conservative predecessor Scott Morrison could not.

The Albanese government had flagged weeks ago its intention to terminate all pandemic leave payments at the end of September. It had already slashed the isolation period from seven to five days, despite warnings from medical experts that half or more individuals would still be infectious at the end of it. And last month Labor oversaw the ending of all daily COVID reporting, making it impossible to monitor the pandemic.

Like all of those measures, yesterday’s decision was taken by the “National Cabinet.” The extra-constitutional body, whose deliberations are shielded by secrecy laws, is dominated by Labor, which holds not only the federal government but also most state and territory administrations.

The decision had clearly been stitched up in advance. Albanese bypassed the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee, which is supposed to provide advice on COVID policies. Instead, he only solicited the opinion of Paul Kelly, Australia’s chief medical officer. Kelly is infamous for describing Omicron as a “Christmas present” last December, before it infected more than ten million people and killed almost 13,000.

The press conference announcing the scrapping of isolation

featured similar medical misinformation. Nothing that was said would have been differed with by fascistic former US President Donald Trump, or any other proponent of the homicidal profit before lives pandemic policies around the world.

It was time to end “COVID exceptionalism,” Albanese and Kelly declared, as they repeatedly compared the coronavirus to the flu. COVID has killed an estimated 22 million people worldwide and the same week as the isolation requirements were ended a University of Queensland study found that it causes damage to the heart and to DNA similar to cancer and other severe diseases.

Both claimed that the population had increased immunity, as a result of mass infection and vaccination. Even the official guidelines, however, warn that with the latest variants of Omicron, infection provides virtually no protection against contracting COVID-19 again.

There are tens of thousands of people who have caught the virus twice or more times in the past year. Medical experts have warned, moreover, that repeat infections likely have a cumulative impact, weakening the immune system and threatening more severe illness.

Vaccination, moreover, while an important scientific advance, has never been capable of vanquishing the pandemic when separated from other vital public health measures. In any case, Australia’s vaccination campaign has effectively ended.

Fewer than 85 percent of people have received two doses, but that provides virtually no protection against Omicron. Some 55 percent of people have had a booster dose, but most many months ago, meaning any immunity has waned. Less than 19 percent of the population has had a fourth shot and there are no plans for a fifth.

The elephant in the room, which Albanese and Kelly ignored and the assembled journalists pretend not to notice, is that COVID is killing more people in Australia than ever before. August was the deadliest month of the pandemic, with the virus claiming 2,056 lives, almost as many as were lost in the entire first two years of the pandemic.

The official numbers, moreover, understate the real toll. According to Australian Bureau of Statistics data released

yesterday, 13,524 excess deaths were recorded in the first six months of 2022, 17.1 percent more than the historical average.

This means that, in addition to 7,658 deaths officially attributed to COVID-19 between January and June, there were a further 5,866 fatalities that likely would not have occurred without the impact of the pandemic.

Kelly waved away the dangers of Long COVID, even though official figures indicate that 31,000 workers called in sick every day of June as a result of it, and some epidemiologists estimate that 1.4 million people, or 5 percent of the national population, may be affected.

In language identical to that previously used by Morrison, Albanese proclaimed a new era of “personal responsibility,” and an end to governments controlling people’s lives.

What he really meant is an end to the slightest public health impediment to corporate profits. For millions of workers, especially casuals, “personal responsibility” means a choice between going to work while infectious with a deadly disease, or staying at home without any pay and starving.

More broadly, the ending of isolation requirements endanger the whole of society, especially those with an underlying medical condition of a compromised immune system. Contrary to official propaganda, such individuals constitute up to half the entire population.

A scenario is being created, similar to the “freedom days” that heralded the “reopening of the economy” and the lifting of successful mitigation measures last December. That campaign resulted in massive infection numbers and at least 13,000 deaths. The end of isolation requirements, on the eve of the holiday season, means the next wave will be even worse.

But the measure has been dictated by corporate, not health interests. That is clear from the response. All of the major financial papers are jubilant. Business Council of Australia chief executive Jennifer Westacott hailed the “final step to reopening the economy and giving Australians the freedom to make their own decisions again.”

Mehring Books, the publishing arm of the Socialist Equality Party (US), is proud to announce the publication in epub format of Volume 1 of *COVID, Capitalism, and Class War: A Social and Political Chronology of the Pandemic*, a compilation of the *World Socialist Web Site's* coverage of this global crisis.

Medical experts and ordinary people, meanwhile, are furious. Topics related to the decision trended on Twitter yesterday, with almost all of the comments denouncing the decision.

The Australian Medical Association condemned the announcement. Its president, Steve Robson, shared a meme which noted that the decision was based on a business plan, not health advice.

Dr Zoë Hyde wrote: “This shameful decision, which implicitly says it’s okay to spread a harmful disease to others, will cost lives, undermine control of all communicable diseases, and will set public health back decades.”

Professor Brendan Crabb stated: “We seem to have

surrendered to the virus for now and for its devastating effects. I just don’t understand because we can hold the line.”

Dozens of other examples could be cited.

The outrage did not extend to the country’s corporatised trade unions. Australian Council of Trade Unions president Michele O’Neil and secretary Sally McManus stated, in sympathy with the decision, that isolation requirements could not last forever. Health Services Union secretary Gerard Hayes has for months campaigned for an end to the isolation mandate on the grounds that it harms the “economy,” i.e., business interests.

Workers are being brought face to face with the character of the Labor government and its union allies as ruthless enforcers of the dictates of big business and the corporations.

As he decreed that the virus would be allowed to circulate everywhere, Albanese rejected calls for any federal increase to hospital funding. Instead, his government is embarking on an austerity agenda, aimed at forcing working people to pay for the hundreds of billions gifted to the major corporations during the pandemic.

In other words, Labor is a party of mass infection and death, brutal social spending cuts and war, as evidenced by its full support for the aggressive US confrontations with Russia and China, which threaten a nuclear catastrophe.

As the Socialist Equality Party has insisted for the past two years, the task of ending the pandemic falls to the working class. The tools required, universal mask mandates, remote learning and lockdown measures, including the closure of non-essential businesses, with full compensation for workers, are well known. The issue is that they impinge on the profit interests of the capitalist class.

That means that the fight against the pandemic is above all a political question. It requires a fight against capitalism and all of its representatives, including Labor and the unions.



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