

Health experts, disabled workers and others denounce Australian government's "forever COVID" policies at online meeting

Richard Phillips
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Last week's unanimous decision by Australian federal and state government leaders to end all compulsory isolation periods for COVID-19 infected people and to abolish pandemic leave payments has been angrily denounced by workers and middle-class people across the country.

Within hours, social media was awash with condemnations of Labor Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and the "National Cabinet" whose actions guarantee a massive wave of coronavirus deaths and infections.

Albanese's Facebook page was peppered with hundreds of enraged comments over the weekend, many of them Labor voters vowing to never support the party again. Albanese's social media directors quickly removed the comments, posting a photograph of the prime minister on Monday holding a koala and cynically tweeting his concerns that these and other animals were endangered in many parts of Australia. This sparked even more angry responses, noting the fact that the National Cabinet decision would eliminate thousands of human lives.

Predictably, the National Cabinet directive was hailed by the corporate media and big business, which have long demanded the removal of all COVID restrictions. An *Australian Financial Review* editorial said the decision was "a welcome step" while the *Australian* declared that treating COVID "like the flu" makes "social and economic sense," falsely insisting that it was no risk to "health outcomes."

Labor and the National Cabinet, the *Australian* continued, is "rolling back the nanny-state approach [to COVID]" that has been a "heavy drain on taxpayers and budget bottom lines"—i.e., corporate profits.

There is, however, a deep and unbridgeable gulf between those imposing this murderous boosting of big business profits, and the life and death issues facing millions of ordinary people.

Some indication of the rising concerns of ordinary people was seen at an online meeting held at short notice on Sunday night by "Australians against COVID" an ad hoc alliance of

medical experts and representatives of the disabled, unemployed and Long COVID sufferers.

Attended by almost 300 people, the meeting was addressed by Craig Wallace, the Advocacy for Inclusion policy chief, Dr Andrew Miller, former president of the Australian Medical Association in Western Australia, Australian Greens Senator Jordon Steele-John and Samantha Connor from People with Disability Australia.

Prior to the event, the group issued a "Call to Action" statement demanding that the National Cabinet reverse its "let it rip" measures and calling for a "public commitment by all governments to the goal of ending the uncontrolled transmission of COVID in Australia."

The statement also demanded the restoration of previous safety measures, full financial support for COVID victims, including special considerations for Long COVID sufferers, the disabled, the unemployed and other disadvantaged people, for "whole of society protections" addressing safe indoor air, respiratory protection, optimal vaccination" and the release of all National Cabinet minutes.

Craig Wallace outlined these demands at Sunday's meeting, as well as the extreme health, economic and social difficulties now facing the disabled and other marginalised social layers. He concluded by calling for "a broader coalition of people to shake things up and make politicians listen."

While the "Call to Action" demands will be ignored by the federal and state governments, the "make politicians listen" call was echoed by Dr Miller, Greens Senator Steele-John and other featured speakers.

Steele-John referenced the systematic bi-partisan elimination of COVID safety and support measures by Labor and Liberal federal and state governments and denounced the National Cabinet decision. He insisted, however, that lockdowns no longer had any support and proposed instead, "a national moment of reflection and mourning, to acknowledge all that we have lost and all those

we have lost.”

The Greens collaborate on a daily basis with the Labor government, at the federal level and in a number of the states. The Greens’ campaign for the May federal election was based on appeals to Labor for a coalition arrangement, even though it has been at the forefront of the “let it rip” policies. In other words, while the Greens may occasionally reference the consequences of the “herd immunity” program, they are themselves implicated in its enforcement.

The meeting chat was peppered with angry condemnations of the National Cabinet decisions, along with calls for legal action against the government, demonstrations outside parliament and MPs offices and other protests.

Carolyn Kennett, a member of the Committee for Public Education, briefly spoke during the discussion period, explaining the necessity for health workers, teachers and other workers to establish independent rank-and-file committees.

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.

“The Committee for Public Education and its overarching body, the Socialist Equality Party, has been calling for safe schools, and safety committees since 2020. We warned before the May election that the Labor Party would just follow the same route as the Liberal Party and the profits of big business would override the concerns about the health of everyone,” she said.

“Workers are being sent out onto the frontline and now they’re going to be infected en masse. We’re seeing new variants arising in Europe and what we are arguing for is rank-and-file committees that work together to promote safety.

“This isn’t just a health problem but it’s a political problem and we can see that from what’s happening in the National Cabinet. This is not going to be resolved by making appeals to the same politicians who are making the decisions to put us all at risk and to ignore the science. It’s not a matter of them being silly or mistaken or not understanding the science. They all know this; they’ve heard it from the professionals. They’re not interested in the lives of ordinary people.

“Whenever a politician talks about the economy,” she continued, “they’re not talking about you and me, they’re talking about profits for big businesses. We need to fight this and the only way we can fight it is to form workers’ organisations, rank-and-file committees.

“We have been fighting for a zero-COVID, scientifically grounded view since 2020; we have a global inquest into the pandemic and we’ve been fighting to support people like Lisa Diaz, [a British parent] who’s been harassed because she wants to keep her children safe from COVID. We’re also prosecuting a campaign in defence of Dr David Berger, who has been brought under disciplinary action by AHPRA [Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency] and so I encourage you to get in contact with us,” Kennett said.

Following Kennett’s remarks, others voiced their support for Dr Berger, describing him as “a hero” and urging other medical practitioners to call out false information and lies by government, health departments and the media.

James Newton from a Tasmanian retirement home said he had not been able to leave the facility for 38 weeks. He told the meeting that there had been an average of one death per week from COVID at the facility and denounced the fact that telehealth appointments with doctors were no longer being covered by Medicare.

Leanne, who has breast cancer, said people were unaware that there was popular support for mask mandates and COVID isolation measures. She called for national action to fight the government measures. “It’s about showing we’re not going down without a fight, that the government just can’t steamroll people,” she said.

Gemma, a disabled person from Adelaide, agreed with Kennett’s remarks and said, “I’m at very serious risk of complications should I catch COVID, so I’m a prisoner in my own home... The capitalist class has gone completely mask off over their desire to claim autonomy over workers’ bodies. They are throwing us all on the pyre.”

While those attending Sunday’s meeting grappled with how to fight the escalating government attacks on public health, not a single union in Australia has held an online meeting to discuss the next, even more disastrous wave of COVID infections. Instead they have enforced every stage of the “reopening” drive, making them responsible for the mass illness of the workers they falsely claim to represent, and the deaths of many.



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