

Craig Wallace, a spokesperson for Australians Against Covid, speaks with the WSWS

Richard Phillips
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The *World Socialist Web Site* recently spoke to Craig Wallace, a spokesperson for Australians Against Covid, an ad hoc group established after Australian governments last month ended all compulsory isolation periods for COVID-19 infected people and abolished pandemic leave payments.

The group, an alliance of medical experts and representatives of the disabled, unemployed and Long COVID sufferers, held its first online meeting within 24 hours of the “National Cabinet” announcing its decisions. Wallace, a Canberra-based former public servant and past president of People with Disability Australia, told the WSWS something of his activism for the disabled community.

“I’ve used a wheelchair since my early teens and am passionate about fighting for the rights of my community,” he explained. “I was really poor but fought my way out of the special segregated-schools system for the disabled, a system which unfortunately is now coming back into vogue.

“People think that the ACT [Australian Capital Territory] is a privileged jurisdiction but once you leave the national capital precinct—the parliament, mausoleums, and monuments—you see that Canberra has real social deprivation. The city is oriented towards managerial public servants, consultants and other blow-ins, and so the living costs are really high.

“I’m very wary about the rhetoric we’ve had in this country about welfare reform, and the narrative that disabled people don’t have lives worth living. We’ve seen these regressive ideas played out in the management of the pandemic.

“We’re constantly told that it’s only old people, the disabled, people with underlying health issues that die from COVID. This is eugenics. It’s what Hitler said, albeit in a new form. It’s morally injurious and needs to be opposed by any and every means possible.”

Richard Phillips: The WSWS described the National Cabinet’s decisions as a direct attack on the poor, the unemployed, the disabled, lower-paid workers. What were your immediate thoughts?

Craig Wallace: It was the last straw as far as I was concerned. It means that the disabled can no longer have any confidence that people they come into contact with, or assist them, will not be carrying COVID. Disabled people are going to be trapped in their homes, without support, without human contact, and very worried about all the health impacts that come with being locked down for

an extended period of time. This could go on for years.

The threat of being infected is very serious for disabled people, and even if they survive any infection, it can mean extra disabilities—heart and neurological issues, and many other problems. This can be the difference between being able to live independently, and winding up in a nursing home. So, my reaction was outrage, anger and the feeling that the community needs to mobilise against this.

The National Cabinet decisions are being made, not on health grounds but on the basis of a political assessment of what governments think society will tolerate. These so-called assessments are happening where voices from the other side—the QAnon people and other extreme-right fringe groups—are allowed to dominate.

Governments are afraid of these people and they’re also afraid of what’s happening in the electorate and that people are “over” the COVID restrictions. The problem is that COVID isn’t “over” us. It is not the kind of disease that you can let just wander around the community. It’s too dangerous.

RP: Last month’s National Cabinet decisions follow its adoption of “let it rip” policies last December, which involved the systematic undermining of rudimentary COVID safety measures, and have seen a massive increase in deaths and infections.

CW: Yes, that’s right and it isn’t based on science or reality. There’s a huge difference between what the politicians and what some health officials are saying and objective reality. This needs to be called out.

We’re heading towards 16,000 people having died from COVID in Australia, the majority of them since January. Compare that to the numbers killed in Bali or the Australian troops killed in war in Afghanistan or 9/11.

The COVID death toll is huge but it is barely acknowledged or responded to. Those who have died from COVID have not even been officially mourned or respected. This shows how out of sync the political environment has become. It feels dystopian. We need more people of conscience and courage to call this out and if that means not being popular, then so be it.

RP: The response to your online meeting was very strong and well-attended. Can you speak about that and what you’re planning to do?

CW: It was called with less than 24 hours’ notice and held at the

same time as the grand final of the football, yet we got hundreds of people attending.

We would like some of the people most impacted by the pandemic—the sick, the chronically ill people, the low paid workers—to be invited into National Cabinet. They should be allowed to address the leaders of the country on the same terms that their so-called health experts and all the others who have the ears of the politicians.

Our aim is to try and shift the ground of public opinion and make clear to governments that there are many people who are deeply opposed to the removal of these health protection settings and measures. We need to make clear to them that we will get politically active and we won't go away.

RP: I don't think it's a question of these politicians not knowing about the situation. They are completely aware of what's going on, but follow the profit-driven demands of big business.

CW: It's certainly true that the ones making all the major decisions know that they are compromising the freedom and community access of one group of people—the elderly, disabled and low-income workers in precarious financial situations. They are prepared to sacrifice the interests of that group of people for what they falsely perceive to be the majority.

A decent society is judged by how it treats the people who are left behind in terms of structures and income support systems, with fairness and decency even when it might appear to be hard to do so.

The majority of Australians would be happy with sensible, effective and scientific-based measures until we can get on top of the pandemic, until it gets to be like measles.

But this is somehow now regarded as being extremist. People are switched off, or afraid to engage, because of how they'll be labelled and treated. For that ground to shift requires a spearhead of people to say we are angry about the protections being removed and are contemplating direct action—meetings, swamping MPs offices and social media pages—until the situation changes.

This was a real test of the new Labor government and they've fallen on that hurdle. They said they'll do things regarding the NDIS [National Disability Insurance Scheme] but regarding COVID, which I regard as the most pressing public issue of this era—and it is going to be an era—they have let us down.

RP: Can you speak more about the impact of the pandemic on the disabled?

CW: It has a cut a swathe through disabled people overseas. In the UK, for example, 60 percent of those who died from COVID had some kind of disability and I suspect it has done the same here in Australia. One of the problems in Australia is that the studies have not been good enough.

The other impact is that people put off getting health treatment—going to the dentist, doctor or dealing with mental health support—because they don't want to go into health spaces and risk infection.

I've put off dealing with a possibly emerging serious condition because I'm concerned about catching COVID, or passing on things to my brother, who has a disability, or my mother who is in her late 80s. That's my family unit and there's a lot of people like me doing that sort of thing.

Governments seem to imagine that all people with disabilities live in group homes somewhere, but this is not the case, thank God. Most people are managing living in communities, with some supports coming in, but these people are not getting the support they need.

The NDIS should have immediately started organising RATs [rapid antigen tests], N95 masks and other essential collaterals to their people as soon as they could in 2020. There was a real failure to supply the necessary resources to support vulnerable people. With a few exceptions, the official responses to COVID have been a story of neglect and failure of people with disabilities through this pandemic and it still continues.

RP: After the National Cabinet meeting you tweeted that the disabled were being deserted by the “progressives” in relationship to COVID safety. Could you explain?

CW: You can quote that from me wherever you want. In the ACT we have what was said to be a progressive government—a Labor-Green coalition—but it is going along with the minimising COVID agenda and letting it run rampant. It is ignoring the calls of people with disability, the elderly, the low-paid and other vulnerable people about the dangers posed. We need to be made the centre of the decision making, to be consulted, and for our concerns to be acted upon. It's a life and death issue, but we're being abandoned.

RP: At the same time, AHPRA [Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency] has threatened to deregister Dr David Berger over his blunt exposures of the misleading official information and falsehoods about COVID while explaining the dangerous consequences for public health.

CW: Yes, I follow David Berger on Twitter. He is being punished but nothing has happened to people like Dr Nick Coatsworth [former federal deputy chief medical officer] who said COVID is not spread through the air. He [Coatsworth] even claimed there was no evidence to show it was airborne. What consequences has he had to face for spreading this false information or all the others that got it wrong from the beginning? They've escaped without any kind of punitive action. The punishment of people like David Berger is reprehensible, wrong and an attempt to silence dissenting voices. It's anti-democratic and totally inappropriate.

I think you guys have seen COVID for what it is and I'm really supportive of what you're doing. In situations like this you find out who your real allies are. The WSWS is one of the few organisations that is being absolutely honest about this situation. I probably wouldn't agree with everything the WSWS writes, but on this issue you've absolutely landed it.



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