

Australian state governments end mandatory reporting of positive COVID tests as new surge begins

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State governments in Victoria and New South Wales have abolished mandatory reporting of positive rapid antigen tests for COVID-19.

The move is grossly reckless and irresponsible. Making the submission of new COVID cases “voluntary” will further deprive public health authorities of accurate and up to date information on the continuing transmission of the virus. It follows the replacement of daily reporting of case numbers with weekly statistics. Scientists and medical officials are being deliberately kept in the dark—just as reports are emerging of a new wave of infections driven by new Omicron subvariants.

The Australian Medical Association (AMA) NSW President Dr Michael Bonning warned that the end of mandatory reporting would make it “more difficult to respond” to future outbreaks.

On Friday, Victorian authorities released weekly infection figures, showing 8,537 reported cases, nearly 25 percent higher than last week. The number of those hospitalised also rose by 20 percent compared to the previous week, with another 172 COVID patients. Chief Health Officer Brett Sutton issued a statement explaining that these and other indicators “show we are at the start of another COVID-19 wave.”

Sutton also explained that new Omicron subvariants, known as BQ.1 and XBB, were circulating and that these “are driving significant case and hospitalisation waves overseas due to their ability to escape immunity from past infection (including BA.5) and waning immunity from past vaccination.”

Despite the worsening situation, the Labor government in Victoria and Liberal-National government in New South Wales are proceeding with

their coordinated dismantling of public health restrictions. Backed by the federal Labor government, last month the two governments ended the five-day mandatory isolation requirement for people who contracted coronavirus. This measure effectively encouraged sick people to continue going to work and infect others, underscoring the ruling elite’s determination to block even the most basic efforts to restrict the spread of the virus.

There is bipartisan agreement that the pandemic must be falsely presented as over. This is based not on scientific and public health grounds but on economic and class ones. Big business interests have made clear that all impediments to profit-making activities must be permanently removed, with workers remaining in their workplaces regardless of the nature and level of COVID-19 transmission. The result is a continuing daily death toll that especially affects the elderly and immune-compromised, and a steadily accumulating number of people affected by Long COVID, with this mass disabling event having unknown long term implications.

The ruling elite’s sabotage of accurate case reporting is an important component of the “let it rip” strategy.

In the first year-and-a-half of the pandemic, mass COVID testing was performed using highly sensitive and accurate polymerase chain reaction (PCR) tests. Provided free of charge, these were conducted by trained nurses and medical workers. At the peak testing level, in mid-2021, more than 200,000 people across Australia were being tested daily. Everyone who felt even minimal COVID or cold symptoms got tested. Due to inadequate government investment in facilities and staff, testing centre queues sometimes stretched for

hours. Ordinary people nevertheless waited to be tested, reflecting the widespread sense of public responsibility and determination to prevent the dangerous spread of infection.

Mass PCR testing repeatedly and rapidly detected outbreaks of community transmission, contributing to Australia being one of the least affected countries in the initial stages of the pandemic.

Rapid antigen tests (RATs) were promoted from mid-2021, at the same time as state and federal governments were moving to permanently end lockdown and other public health restrictions.

In August last year, the New South Wales government issued RATs to Year 12 students who were instructed to do their exams in crowded school halls, despite Sydney being in lockdown at the time. This measure was condemned by medical experts. The Royal College of Pathologists of Australasia issued a statement that it was “increasingly concerned at the level of commentary that promotes rapid antigen tests for the detection of Covid-19, despite the evidence [that] shows that there are significant differences between the actual performance of rapid antigen tests and manufacturers’ claimed test performance.”

RATs’ unreliability has since been confirmed by research studies. One paper published last January in *BMJ [British Medical Journal] Evidence-Based Medicine* found that compared to PCR tests, RATs failed to detect COVID-19 in 36 percent of infected children. For infected kids who did not have symptoms, the rapid antigen tests missed the virus in 44 percent of cases.

Despite this, state governments made the mass distribution of RATs a centrepiece of their school reopening drive at the beginning of the year. Then Prime Minister Scott Morrison made clear the pro-business imperative behind this campaign, declaring that school closures were adversely affecting workforce participation.

In New South Wales and Victoria, families and teachers were issued free RATs and instructed to test twice weekly, regardless of having any symptoms. NSW Premier Dominic Perrottet openly stated this was aimed at boosting “confidence”—in other words, the tests were being used as a cover for the reopening drive amid widespread concern and opposition to the official embrace of mass infection.

Reporting of COVID cases was made mandatory last January in response to such sentiment. Positive RATs had to be logged through an online form or app, with a failure to do so in NSW incurring a fine of \$1,000.

Over the course of this year, testing provisions have been wound back. PCR testing centres have been shut down and access to such tests restricted. RATs are no longer freely provided in many schools and regular testing by students and school workers is not required. The federal Labor government likewise last July ended the free provision of RATs to concession card holders.

The lifting of the mandatory reporting in Australia’s two most populous states is effectively encouraging people not to alert authorities when they contract COVID.

In the first week after mandatory reporting was scrapped, identified case numbers via RATs substantially declined in NSW and Victoria, despite evidence that actual infections were rising. The real level of coronavirus transmission—already much higher than the official figures indicate—will bear no real relationship to the number of voluntarily provided positive test results.

As part of the fight to build a movement of the working class for the elimination of COVID-19, the Health Workers Rank-and-File Committee (HWRFC) and the Committee for Public Education (CFPE) call on all workers, students and professional people to join an online public meeting on Sunday, November 20 at 3 p.m. (AEDT).

The meeting, titled, “Unite educators and health workers: Oppose the ending of COVID protection measures! Lives before profit!” will outline a political perspective, including the building of rank-and-file committees, to unify health workers, teachers and other sections of workers in the fight for decent wages, working conditions and the elimination of COVID-19. Register now: <https://bit.ly/3CRCuOh>



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