

Australia imposes mandatory COVID tests for Chinese travelers

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The Labor government announced on Sunday that it has joined several countries, led by the US, in imposing restrictions on incoming Chinese travellers. From Sunday, they will only be permitted to enter Australia if they have returned a negative COVID test no more than 48 hours prior to their departure.

The government has sought to present the requirement as a public health measure. This morning, Treasurer Jim Chalmers responded to angry denunciations of the coordinated restrictions by Chinese authorities. He claimed the move had been taken out of “an abundance of caution.”

Labor, moreover, was acting because, he said, “there certainly is a lot of concern around the global health community about the transparency and quality of data that we see out of China on COVID.”

To describe this as an exercise in staggering hypocrisy risks understating matters. The Labor government, like the Biden administration in the US, has dismantled any pretence of a coordinated public health response to the pandemic.

Every aspect of a scientifically grounded COVID policy has been dispensed with, from mass testing to the reporting of basic coronavirus indices and basic mitigation measures such as mandatory indoor mask-wearing. The sole concern has been to ensure that the economy is “reopened” to maximize corporate profits, regardless of the consequences in illness and death.

Chalmers was asked by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation if the restrictions on Chinese entry were “politically-motivated.” He lamely responded that he did not “see it precisely like that.”

But clearly the government’s actions are. For more than a year, the major imperialist powers, led by the US, campaigned against China’s then zero-COVID policy, which repeatedly succeeded in quashing outbreaks and limiting serious illnesses and deaths to a miniscule fraction of those occurring in the world’s other major population centres.

There were three basic motivations. Firstly, this campaign aimed to restore the unfettered activities of global

corporations in China, many of them US-based, which were occasionally disrupted by lockdowns and other safety measures. Secondly, China’s success in repeatedly eliminating the virus was a living indictment of the “let it rip” policy pursued by the rest of the world’s governments and exposed as a lie their claims that there was no alternative but to “live with the virus.” Thirdly, it was another component of the vilification of the Chinese regime as the US and its allies step up the preparations for conflict with Beijing.

The Chinese Communist Party regime’s capitulation to this campaign has created a catastrophe. Hospitals are reportedly being overrun in many areas and experts are warning that millions could die within months.

The US, having agitated for the overturn of China’s elimination program, is now exploiting the consequences. Having denounced Beijing for suppressing the virus, Washington and its allies are now denouncing it for lifting its zero-Covid policy and allowing the virus to run rampant as other governments have already done. It is all grist for the anti-China propaganda mill as US-led military preparations escalate.

Since it came to office in May, the Labor government has dramatically intensified Australia’s frontline role in this war drive. It has functioned as a US attack dog throughout the region, hectoring countries in the Pacific and South-East Asia to line up behind the anti-China confrontation or face “consequences” if they do not. At the same time, it has undertaken to vastly expand US basing in Australia, including of nuclear capable assets, while conducting its own military build-up.

This is the real basis for the imposition of the travel restrictions, not concerns with public health.

Labor fully supported the disastrous reopening of December 2021 which unleashed an Omicron tsunami. At the time, it was in federal opposition but held power in the majority of the states and territories as they overturned previously successful mitigation measures.

Since being elected at the federal level, Labor has gone

further than its Liberal-National predecessor. It has presided over the ending of daily reporting of COVID cases, infections, deaths and all other indices.

While limiting information on the spread of the virus, Labor has adopted policies designed to allow it to spread. This has included ending any requirement to report a positive Rapid Antigen Test (RAT) to the authorities and any form of mandatory isolation for COVID-positive individuals. That measure, taken simultaneously with the abolition of federal pandemic leave payments, was transparently aimed at keeping workers on the job even if they are infected.

In other words, China is merely catching up to measures that have been pioneered in the major capitalist countries, including Australia.

Labor's references to concern over the "transparency" of Chinese data are particularly hypocritical. The very same day that the travel restriction was announced, January 1, new testing criteria came into effect in Australia.

Under the new regime, people will need a doctor's referral to access Polymerase chain reaction (PCR) tests, which are substantially more accurate at diagnosing an Omicron infection than a RAT. Many doctors are ending bulk-billing, which provides free, state-subsidised appointments, due to an effective funding freeze. That means such a referral could cost \$70.

But according to the Labor policy, only those who are classed as "vulnerable" should be provided with a referral. In effect, the vast majority of the population has been denied access to a reliable test for COVID infection.

The consequences of the dismantling of the testing regime are already becoming apparent. In the last national weekly report for COVID infections, released on December 30, case numbers had almost halved, from 105,916 the week before to 56,158.

That sudden drop would be completely inexplicable, given the huge number of unmasked indoor gatherings that occurred over Christmas. But several states did not even bother to report case numbers, even deaths, under conditions where a further surge is likely. In others states testing was clearly down.

At least one of the states that did not report last week, Queensland, where Labor is in government, is not supplying any COVID statistics until January 13.

The "let it rip" program resulted in at least 14,776 official COVID deaths last year, compared with 2,253 in the previous two years. Experts have stated, however, that when excess fatalities are factored in, the toll for 2022 is more likely to be 25,000.

The sudden concern over the Chinese outbreak, under conditions of the unfettered spread of the virus domestically,

has produced a response from the Australian political and media establishment that could be described as schizophrenic.

Corporate journalists, who have cheered the lifting of every public health measure in Australia, have spoken darkly of the Chinese authorities doing nothing to prevent the mass illness and death of their population. Not a single corporate or Australian Broadcasting Corporation reporter challenged the ending of daily COVID reporting in Australia, yet they express deep concern about the paucity of accurate information coming out of Beijing.

Publications which promoted the unscientific theory of "herd immunity," claiming that the continuous spread of the virus would end the pandemic, have now warned that the massive transmission of the virus in China could result in the development of new variants.

In his advice to the government, Labor's Chief Medical Officer Paul Kelly had said there was no public health justification for the restriction. Kelly, who infamously described the emergence of Omicron as a "Christmas present" a year ago, said such a restriction would be "inconsistent" with the existing "approach" to COVID, i.e., allowing the virus to spread everywhere.

In opposing discriminatory and politically-motivated measures such as the China travel restrictions, the working class must take up the fight for a comprehensive public health program aimed at eliminating the virus and ending the pandemic. The measures required to do this, including mass testing, indoor masking, air filtration, and, where necessary, lockdowns, are known. But their implementation is blocked by capitalist interests and the governments that defend them.

That underscores the fact that the fight against the pandemic is in essence a fight for a socialist alternative to the profit system.



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