

Australian Labor health minister lies about COVID disaster

**Mike Head, SEP candidate for NSW Legislative Council
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Australian Health Minister Mark Butler last week admitted that thousands of people have died since October as a result of COVID-19 protective measures being axed under the Albanese Labor government. Then he defended the policy.

First, Butler brazenly lied. He told a February 8 media conference that the government had simply acted on the basis of poor “advice.” This had “tragically” resulted in the “loss of many lives.” He claimed the government was wrongly told that the current Omicron wave would be “short and sharp,” not many months long.

The exact opposite is true. The Labor government, in collaboration with all the state and territory governments—Labor and Coalition—in the secretive “National Cabinet,” defied and suppressed warnings in order to pursue a corporate profit-driven “let it rip” policy, knowing that many people would die.

Among the warnings that the Labor government covered up was its own COVID review, handed to it last September by former Health Department chief Jane Halton. Her report stated: “A catastrophic variant which renders some or all existing vaccines completely or partially ineffective cannot be ruled out. The trajectory of the pandemic for at least the next 12 months is uncertain.”

Butler and the Labor government refused to release Halton’s report and fought for months to keep it secret from freedom of information requests. Even now, many pages remain redacted, hiding the full incriminating truth.

After blaming faulty advice for the death toll, Butler contradicted himself. He insisted that the lifting of COVID restrictions was “the right approach,” not a “mistake” and would continue throughout 2023. “I don’t see any sense that that was the wrong decision,” he said.

Butler’s statements underscore the necessity of the Socialist Equality Party’s intervention into the March 25 New South Wales (NSW) state election. As the SEP election statement says, we are standing candidates in order to take forward the fight against this disastrous “let it rip” COVID policy, and program of war and austerity, supported by every other party.

We say:

- Health and lives before profit!

- Demand the immediate reintroduction of safety measures: universal indoor masking, free mass testing, contact-tracing, air filtration and, where necessary, lockdowns with full compensation for small businesspeople and workers.

- The pandemic can and must be finally ended!

Butler revealed that, while about one million infections had been officially reported during the ongoing COVID wave, the real government estimate was “3 to 4 million,” due to the dropping of mandatory reporting. Around 2,600 people had lost their lives, including more than 800 residents of aged care facilities.

Even these terrible figures are a whitewash. Federal Health Department statistics, also released last week, officially confirmed what was already known: that more people were infected and more died in the first eight months of the Albanese government than in the previous 18 months under the Liberal-National government.

The statistics reported 9,332 fatalities in the eight months after Labor took office last May 21, compared to 8,471 deaths under the former Morrison Coalition government. More people died in aged care too: 2,652, compared to 2,415.

This is a vast underestimate as well. Based on excess death figures, as many as 25,000 Australians lost their lives to COVID and related causes last year.

Having blamed unspecified incorrect advice for thousands of deaths, Butler peddled another fraud: that the current wave is receding. In reality, the deaths are continuing. Even according to the official records, 248 people died of COVID last week, up by 2.

Much worse could lie ahead as a result of the pandemic being let loose in China, already estimated to have infected over a billion people, increasing the danger of new, potentially more transmissible, lethal and vaccine-evading mutations. Under intense economic pressure from the US and other global powers, the Chinese regime abandoned its

successful zero-COVID policy, which had repeatedly eliminated outbreaks in major cities, and joined the worldwide capitalist “live with the virus” program for the sake of “reopening.”

Butler himself spoke of “what inevitably will be the next wave of COVID sometime over the course of 2023.” Yet he said the government’s policy, supposedly based on “best evidence,” would not change.

After months of delay, Butler announced that long-overdue fifth vaccine doses would become available from February 20, but only for those who had not been infected or vaccinated in the previous six months.

He revealed that 14 million Australian adults had gone more than six months since their last dose of vaccine—making them vulnerable to serious infections—but millions of them had been infected since October, so they would have to wait longer!

The COVID catastrophe, combined with Labor government funding cuts, has intensified the public healthcare breakdown produced by decades of underfunding, heightening the dangers facing patients and health workers on the frontline.

Public hospitals have been heavily impacted by the pandemic. Emergency departments face a growing crisis of life-threatening delays and dangerous understaffing. In NSW, between July and September 2022, just 65.6 percent of emergency patients were treated within the required time. In working-class western Sydney, only 43.2 percent received timely care.

In line with its “live with the virus” offensive, however, the federal Labor government’s October budget cut pandemic funding. Payments to the states and territories for public hospitals are expected to decrease by more than \$755 million this financial year and \$2.4 billion over four years.

At the same time, the Labor government is allocating hundreds of billions of dollars for AUKUS nuclear-powered submarines and other military weaponry to prepare for involvement in a US-led war against China. Amid an escalating cost-of-living and interest rate crisis, it is also demanding real wage cuts and other sacrifices from workers to pay for the inflationary spiral triggered by the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine and the \$400 billion in business bailouts during the first two years of the COVID pandemic.

The ruling parties, the corporate media and the trade union apparatus are trying to suppress discussion of all these critical issues. There is no debate on the deadly COVID policies, the danger of a nuclear war or the offensive against the social conditions of workers. The SEP alone opposes this silence and will use the election to break it.

The NSW Liberal-National government—fully supported

by the Labor opposition—was central to the bipartisan collusion to overturn COVID mitigation measures. Premier Dominic Perrottet worked hand-in-glove with his Victorian Labor counterpart Daniel Andrews and then Prime Minister Scott Morrison to let loose Omicron.

This was not a mistake. It was a deliberate policy of social murder. As our election statement explains: “Businesses had to be fully reopened and children and teachers forced back into COVID-infested classrooms, so that corporations could make maximum profits.”

Over the past year, there have been major strikes in NSW against the intolerable and unsafe conditions by nurses and other health workers, as well as teachers and rail workers. But the union bureaucrats have shut down these struggles to channel the discontent behind the election of yet another pro-business Labor government. Yet a government led by NSW Labor leader Chris Minns would be no different whatsoever, as the Albanese government’s record proves.

The SEP is the only party opposing this homicidal program. We say no more unnecessary and entirely avoidable deaths. We, along with our sister parties of the International Committee of the Fourth International around the world, are fighting for a scientific policy that can eliminate the coronavirus globally, because we oppose capitalism and its subordination of everything to profit and wealth accumulation.

Anger is growing among workers. But that is not enough by itself. Workers need their own revolutionary party, with a clear socialist perspective to reorganise society completely on the basis of social need, not the dictates of the financial oligarchs and their governments. We appeal to all workers, students and principled middle-class people to promote and participate in our campaign and, above all, to join the Socialist Equality Party.

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