

Australia records 205 COVID deaths, highest weekly figure since February

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Last week, Australia recorded 205 deaths from COVID, the highest seven-day total since February 10. This brings the total official death toll to 21,463, with more than 4,400 people dying from the virus so far this year.

Across the country, 2,340 people were hospitalised with COVID last week, with 66 receiving treatment in intensive care units. Hospitalisation figures for each of the past five weeks, including the June 2 peak of 2,771, have all been higher than at any time in February, March or April.

Health officials reported 19,767 new confirmed cases in the week ending June 16, the first time the total has been less than 20,000 since mid-March.

With public testing and reporting infrastructure almost completely torn down by state, territory and federal governments—all Labor with the exception of Tasmania—infection numbers are, at most, only indicative of general trends.

Data scientist Mike Honey, who has closely tracked the pandemic in Australia and elsewhere, estimates that infections are being underreported by as much as 14 times. This would mean that as many as 1.8 million people—7 percent of the Australia population—may have been infected in the past four weeks alone.

The hospitalisation and infection figures may indicate that the current “wave,” Australia’s seventh, is on the ebb. But the conception of sharp peaks separated by long troughs, appropriate in the early stages of the pandemic, has been rendered almost completely irrelevant. With no public health measures in place, very low levels of vaccine-induced immunity, and a bubbling “variant soup,” ordinary people now confront an unending cycle of infection and reinfection.

Less than 3.3 million Australians have received a booster shot in the past six months, meaning more than

85 percent of the population is unprotected. Vaccination rates are shockingly low even among the most vulnerable layers.

Of those aged care residents who have been eligible for a booster dose since the beginning of this year, just 51.8 percent have received one. Since the start of 2023, around 32,000 aged care residents have been infected with COVID and 1,000 have died.

Amid the rising weekly death toll, state governments are continuing to tear down the few remaining vestiges of a public health response.

In Victoria, the Andrews Labor government’s budget, announced last month, will slash funding for nine local public health units across the state by 40 percent over the next two years. These units were established to manage infection control and tracking in October 2020, at the height of the pandemic’s second wave.

According to the *Age*, around 30 workers at the North Eastern Public Health Unit—which covers some of Melbourne’s poorest neighbourhoods—will be let go at the end of the month. The Western Public Health Unit will also make “substantial” cuts, while other units have not spelled out what the impact on jobs will be.

Despite the massive funding cuts, the public health units will be saddled with broader responsibilities. By the end of the year, they will be tasked with managing outbreaks of all notifiable infectious diseases except tuberculosis.

A government spokesperson told the *Age*, “The change reflects the reduced impact COVID-19 is now having and that the response to COVID is now more aligned with other communicable diseases.”

This flies in the face of reality. Since the start of this year, more than 1,600 Victorians have died from COVID, almost 10 each day, and more than succumbed

in the entirety of 2020 and 2021.

In New South Wales (NSW), Deputy Premier and Education Minister Prue Car told the *Daily Telegraph* last week that an “enhanced” COVID cleaning program for schools would be discontinued from next term. Car declared of the \$30 million per term measures, “when budgets are tight this is money that could be better spent elsewhere.”

While surface cleaning alone does little to prevent the spread of COVID in schools, where crowded, poorly ventilated classrooms are the norm, the ending of the program reflects the Labor government’s general disregard for the health of children, teachers and the broader community.

The federal Labor government has come under fire in recent weeks over its failure to hold a “royal commission or some form of inquiry” into the pandemic, as Labor called for ahead of the May 2022 federal election.

Prime Minister Anthony Albanese said last month, “when we are confident that we’re through those issues, then we’ll examine it.” In other words, Albanese, who has presided over the systematic dismantling of virtually all public health measures against COVID, now refuses to order an inquiry on the grounds that the pandemic isn’t over.

Part of the reasoning behind this was made explicit by former NSW Labor premier Bob Carr yesterday. He wrote on Twitter that a “Royal Commission into Covid would be a waste of money. Do a quick cheap review. Politically, [former Liberal prime minister Scott] Morrison cannot be harmed further.”

Carr makes clear that such an inquiry would have nothing to do with protecting the health and lives of the Australian population from this or future pandemics. Its only purpose would be political, and there are no political gains to be made because Albanese, along with the rest of the Labor Party, agreed with and facilitated every homicidal decision that was made under Morrison.

While Morrison and former Liberal NSW premier Dominic Perrottet were the public face of 2021’s “let it rip” policies, these were developed and enacted by the Labor-dominated “National Cabinet,” and especially Daniel Andrews.

This was established beyond any shadow of a doubt by the Albanese government’s deepening of these pro-

business measures. More than 13,300 deaths have been recorded in the 13 months since the federal Labor government was elected, compared with just over 8,000 in the 26 months preceding.

Even if a Royal Commission into the pandemic were to take place, it is unclear what the terms of reference would be. Many of those calling for an inquiry are doing so from the standpoint of ensuring that there can never be a repeat of lockdowns, border closures, mask mandates and other public health measures that interfere even minimally with the profit interests of big business.

Daniel Wild, director of the Institute of Public Affairs, a right-wing think tank, declared, “Australians need reassurance that bureaucrats will no longer be able to unilaterally regulate basic human activity under threat of criminal sanction.”

By “Australians,” Wild means “Australian capitalism” and by “basic human activity,” he means the right of big business to demand that workers remain on the job, even at risk of their lives. While he speaks in particularly blunt terms, what Wild is expressing is in fact the position of Labor and the entire political establishment.

This underscores both the necessity for a truly independent and scientific analysis of the COVID pandemic and the fact that no capitalist government could, or would want to, carry out such an inquiry.

The Global Workers’ Inquest into the COVID-19 Pandemic, initiated by the *World Socialist Web Site*, is the only international examination exposing the homicidal policies of capitalist governments worldwide. The inquest is not merely an academic review. It is putting forward the means through which workers can oppose the actions of the ruling classes that have resulted in the preventable deaths of millions worldwide and fight for the elimination of the deadly virus.



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