H5N1 “Bird Flu” spreads to Australia

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Concerns have been raised for the health of the Australian public and wildlife following the discovery of multiple birds infected by the H5N1 strain of Avian Influenza (“bird flu”) last month. The first cases were two migratory seabirds found near Esperance in Western Australia.

Confirmation of H5N1 bird flu in a migratory giant petrel found near Hawks Nest, New South Wales, in recent days extends the virus’s known presence to Australia’s east coast and brings the total to six cases. Numbers are expected to rise as more birds are investigated. Australia had been the last continent to have proven local cases of H5N1.

Classified as a “high pathogenicity avian influenza” (HPAI) virus because of its high fatality rate, H5N1 has been responsible for the deaths of millions of farm livestock and wildlife globally since 2020. H5N1 has infected nearly 1,000 people this century and has a historical death rate of about 50 percent. Farm workers who handle infected animals are especially at risk.

The virus is contagious, and spreads both by direct contact with infected body fluids and airborne transmission. It can also spread through untreated meat and dairy products, like raw poultry or unpasteurised milk. In humans and most animals, H5N1 attacks the respiratory tract, causing respiratory failure in the most severe cases. Vaccines and anti-viral treatments exist for some strains of H5N1 but are of limited effectiveness. Infected animals are usually culled in order to prevent spread, where quarantine is not practical.

Migratory seabirds are recognised as major carriers for H5N1, and in recent years have been responsible for bringing the virus to South America, Antarctica and various islands in the Indian Ocean, devastating local wildlife. It is likely that the birds that brought H5N1 to Australia came from the sub-Antarctic region, a route predicted by scientists based on known migration patterns.

The circumstances of these discoveries suggest that a large outbreak may be underway. H5N1 could spread to other species of local birds in Australia, as well as marine life and farm animals, resulting in mass die-offs with severe ecological and economic consequences. Any mass outbreak would put humans at risk of being infected, either by interacting with dead animals containing the disease, or as farm workers dealing with livestock.

The arrival of H5N1 to Australia has been long expected. The virus was first identified in 1959, among poultry in Scotland. It emerged in geese in Guangdong, China in 1996, with the first known human outbreak occurring in Hong Kong in 1997, infecting 18 people and causing six deaths. Human cases of H5N1 rose in the following decade in China and the Middle East, and by the 2010s isolated cases had been identified in Southeast Asia, the Indian subcontinent and North America.

In 2020, shortly after the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, a series of mutations in H5N1 led to the current sub-variant of the virus, a highly contagious and adaptable strain designated the H5N1 clade 2.3.4.4b, which has become particularly concerning to scientists and public health.

Spreading primarily through migratory seabirds and waterfowl, particularly ducks and geese, H5N1 surged globally from 2021–24 in nearly every continent, including Antarctica. The global spread was likely exacerbated by the effects of climate change, with temperature variations and increased cyclones in 2021–22 theorised to have altered the patterns of bird migrations.

The virus has been particularly devastating for poultry and wild bird populations, with estimates of 280 million birds being killed or culled between 2021 and 2024—the most significant drop in global bird populations in decades.

However, outbreaks have not been limited to birds. H5N1 has been reported in dozens of mammal species, including bears, foxes, coyotes, seals and dolphins, as well as dairy cattle and pigs. The spread of H5N1 has been so extensive that scientists have termed it “panzootic”—a global pandemic in animals.

The 2021–24 surge also saw over 100 human infections, and 10 deaths, with most cases in the United States and Cambodia. In many cases, agricultural workers contracted H5N1 through contact with dairy cattle, which suffer fewer obvious signs of illness and concentrate viral particles in their mammary glands, spreading the disease via untreated milk. Australia also saw a single case in 2024, a returned traveller who had contracted H5N1 while visiting India.

Coverage in the corporate media and the response of federal and state governments have focused mainly on the economic impact on the agricultural industry, should H5N1 spread into local poultry. Already, in response to the initial bird flu cases, Papua New Guinea, a major customer for Australian poultry, has suspended imports of chicken and eggs.

In the US, mass cullings from bird flu resulted in at least $1.4

billion of additional costs for the American poultry industry between 2021 and 2024, and caused estimated price increases for eggs of up to 300 percent in parts of the country. Similar impacts are feared in Australia, under conditions of an escalating cost-of-living crisis.

While these are serious concerns, what is being downplayed are the threats to humans, with only those who interact directly with infected animals considered at risk of infection.

Human-to-human transmission has not yet been observed. However, there has been an ever-widening number of species infected by H5N1, and repeated instances of animals infecting humans. This highlights the risk that with subsequent mutations, the virus will develop the ability to more easily infect and then to spread among humans. This process, a natural phenomenon known as zoonotic spillover, has a long history and was responsible for the COVID pandemic and Ebola.

The alarm for a spillover of bird flu has been raised by scientists for years. In 2010, influenza virologist Professor Yoshihiro Kawaoka and colleagues from the School of Veterinary Medicine at the University of Wisconsin-Madison reported the possibility that H5N1 could gain certain characteristics from circulating human influenza viruses (a process known as reassortment), which would increase its capacity to infect humans.

Most recently, in a comment on the risk of bird flu published by *The Conversation*, biosecurity scientist Professor Raina MacIntyre of the Kirby Institute pointed to the ability of H5N1 to infect pigs, and noted the similarities between pig and human respiratory cell receptors.

These risks necessitate a comprehensive public health strategy, guided by scientists and health officials, including adequate testing and contact tracing infrastructure, appropriate protection for agricultural workers, and intensified development of new vaccines and treatments.

However, rather than protect lives, it is the defence of profits that has been the central focus of capitalist governments. In the US, an epicentre of animal and human H5N1 infections, the approach of successive administrations has been characterised by bipartisan neglect. Both Presidents Joe Biden and now Donald Trump have refused to take steps to safeguard against a potential bird flu pandemic.

In 2024, bird flu was spreading amongst dairy cattle in the US, and raw unpasteurised milk threatened agricultural workers and the broader public. Local and federal governments could have mandated testing of all dairy herds and the entire milk supply, provided PPE for dairy and poultry workers, conducted contact tracing and tested infected and exposed individuals, offered H5N1 vaccination to workers, and banned the sale of raw milk in affected regions. Yet none of these scientific policies was implemented with any rigour.

This was in keeping with the approach of governments worldwide to COVID, where from 2021 onwards basic measures to limit the pandemic were rejected or abandoned. In line with the demands of finance capital, this so-called “let it rip” approach was implemented with the knowledge that it would kill millions.

Australia is not an exception. Since it was elected in 2022 promising to “follow the science” on COVID, the Albanese Labor government, with the active support of the trade unions, pursued these policies, declaring workers and their families had to live with the virus. The result is over 29,000 deaths, at least 12 million officially recorded infections, and an estimated 400,000 people struggling with COVID-related disability in Australia and still growing.

Labor has announced $113 million in additional funding in response to the initial H5N1 cases, primarily to safeguard the export capability of Australian agribusiness, with only $22 million for increased vaccinations and protective equipment.

Decades of attacks on the public health system by Labor and the opposition Liberal-National Coalition governments have drastically undermined its ability to deal with any pandemic. Every part of the country’s public healthcare infrastructure is beset with chronic under-staffing and equipment shortages. Long treatment delays are the norm.

This record makes clear that if bird flu were to develop into a pandemic, the fundamental response of Labor and other capitalist governments, as it was in response to COVID, will be to ensure big businesses operate at full capacity, irrespective of the death toll.

Current and recent experiences with COVID, Ebola and other diseases and the dangers posed by H5N1 require an international response. Man-made climate change, the globalisation of production, and disruptions to wildlife habitats all pose ever increasing risks of existing and new diseases emerging and spreading, which cannot be solved by any one country.

The starting point of any scientific response is an emergency expansion of healthcare infrastructure, including millions of dollars for public hospitals, universal free testing and the shutdown, with full pay for all workers, of the most dangerous industries. That requires a political struggle by the working class based on a socialist perspective that makes basic social needs, not corporate profits, the priority.