

Australia: Labor government ends universal free COVID vaccination

Gary Alvernia
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The Albanese Labor government has ended free COVID vaccination for most of the Australian population, removing one of the last remaining public health protections against the continuing pandemic. Since October 1, COVID vaccinations have cost up to \$180 per dose for those excluded from the free program.

Under the new arrangements, free vaccination is restricted to people aged 65 and over, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders aged 50 and over, and adults assessed as severely immunocompromised, including some cancer patients and organ transplant recipients.

The imposition of this exorbitant charge, amid a cost-of-living crisis, will further depress already low vaccination rates. Prices at pharmacies range from \$120 to \$180, meaning a couple could face a bill of up to \$360. Millions of workers and their families, struggling with soaring rents, mortgages and food prices, face another substantial financial barrier to essential healthcare.

The government's narrow eligibility criteria exclude large numbers of people with chronic health conditions, including younger adults with cardiovascular and respiratory diseases, diabetes and other illnesses associated with an increased risk of severe COVID outcomes. Healthcare workers, teachers, retail employees and others repeatedly exposed to infection will also have to pay unless they qualify for free vaccination.

The decision exposes the fraud of the official justifications for abandoning public health measures during the pandemic.

In 2021, the Morrison Coalition government, backed by the federal Labor opposition and Labor and Coalition state governments alike, spearheaded the drive to abandon COVID suppression measures and fully reopen the economy in the interests of corporate profits. Vaccination was promoted as a virtual silver bullet, supposedly allowing the population to "live with the virus" without unacceptable consequences. Lockdowns, social distancing and other measures to prevent transmission were declared unnecessary obstacles to economic activity.

The emergence of Omicron was then seized upon to accelerate reopening, on the grounds that suppressing

transmission was futile. The result was mass infection, overwhelmed hospitals and thousands of deaths. Far from reversing course, the Albanese government subsequently dismantled virtually all remaining measures to limit transmission.

Now, having invoked mass vaccination to justify allowing COVID to spread unchecked, Labor is withdrawing universal free access to vaccination itself. Successive governments have already closed mass vaccination centres, largely abandoned public promotion of booster shots and left vaccination increasingly dependent on GPs and pharmacies. The latest decision further undermines the central justification advanced for the reopening drive.

Vaccination rates have plummeted. By September, only 1.7 million Australians, around 6 percent of the population, had received a COVID vaccine during 2026. Even in residential aged care, only around 40 percent of people aged over 75 had received a booster in the preceding six months.

This contrasts with 2022, when almost 95 percent of Australians had completed their initial COVID vaccination course, amid mass government campaigns promoting and providing free vaccines. While initial vaccination and recent booster uptake are different measures, the figures underscore the collapse of the earlier mass vaccination drive.

Vaccination is not sufficient by itself to eliminate COVID. Nevertheless, it remains an essential public health measure, substantially reducing the risks of severe illness, hospitalisation and death. It can also reduce the risk of some post-COVID complications, including long-COVID. The continuing evolution of the virus and waning immune protection make access to updated vaccines particularly important.

Yet the decision to restrict free vaccination has been made with little public debate or opposition from the parliamentary parties.

The Labor government left the cost of vaccination to private providers. In September, the Department of Health told SBS News that private vaccine supply and pricing were commercial matters for manufacturers and providers.

Pharmacies have subsequently set widely varying prices, with some indicating that the wholesale cost makes stocking privately purchased vaccines commercially unattractive.

The withdrawal of free vaccination is the latest stage in an anti-scientific assault on public health measures and infrastructure, carried out by successive governments in the interests of big business.

During 2020–21, widespread public opposition to mass infection and demands from workers for protection compelled governments to implement measures to limit transmission. These included limited lockdowns, social distancing, restrictions on gatherings, mandatory isolation and quarantine and mask requirements.

These measures were progressively dismantled as governments subordinated public health to the demands of big business for the unrestricted resumption of economic activity. The Albanese government largely avoided the issue during the 2022 federal election campaign before accelerating the removal of remaining protections after taking office.

Within little more than a year, virtually all nationally coordinated measures aimed at suppressing transmission had been abandoned. Through the “National Cabinet,” Labor and state and territory governments ended mandatory isolation periods and pandemic leave payments for most workers, forcing those without adequate sick leave to choose between losing income and attending work while infectious. Mask requirements were removed from domestic flights and most public settings.

Access to PCR testing was drastically curtailed, dedicated testing centres were closed, and regular public reporting of infections was progressively wound back. No comprehensive national programme was established to improve indoor air quality through ventilation and filtration in schools, workplaces, hospitals and other public buildings.

Announcing the abolition of mandatory isolation in September 2022, Albanese declared that Australia was moving away from “COVID exceptionalism,” insisting that it was unsustainable for governments to continue paying workers to stay home when infected.

The consequences have been devastating. More than 30,000 deaths involving COVID have been recorded in Australia since the pandemic began, including almost 10,000 deaths attributed directly to the virus in 2022 alone, when it became the country's third-leading cause of death. The official toll understates the full impact of the pandemic, including deaths associated with undiagnosed infections and longer-term complications. Millions more have been infected, with many suffering prolonged illness and disability. Yet rather than reverse course, Labor has continued to dismantle the remaining protections.

Official figures recorded fewer than 76,000 COVID cases in Australia during the first nine and a half months of 2022. But these numbers vastly understate actual infections. With widespread PCR testing and systematic case monitoring abandoned, declining notifications cannot be taken as reliable evidence of a corresponding fall in transmission.

For the working class, COVID remains a life-and-death issue. The alternative to the present policy of normalising repeated mass infection is a coordinated, scientifically based programme to suppress transmission and protect the population, directed towards the international elimination of the virus.

This requires universal free access to updated vaccines, expanded public healthcare, systematic improvements to indoor ventilation and air filtration, accessible testing, appropriate masking in high-risk settings, and fully paid leave for infected workers.

Such a program cannot be entrusted to governments that have systematically dismantled public health protections to safeguard corporate profits. It requires the independent mobilisation of the working class against the capitalist ruling elite and its subordination of human life to private wealth.

That can only be developed through a rebellion against the union bureaucracies, which have supported and enforced the gutting of COVID safety measures, and have not even commented on the ending of free vaccines. It poses the need for rank-and-file committees in workplaces and industries, independent of the bureaucracies, to fight for safe working conditions, free healthcare and the measures necessary to prevent the spread of COVID.

This struggle must be developed internationally as part of the fight for a workers’ government and the socialist reorganisation of society, placing the immense resources of modern science, technology and production at the service of human need rather than private profit.



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