

Australia: Victorian Labor government announces homicidal plan to lift lockdown

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Victorian Labor Premier Daniel Andrews announced yesterday that lockdown measures in Australia's second most-populous state will be lifted next month, even though government modelling predicts this will likely overwhelm the hospitals and lead to thousands of preventable deaths.

The announcement is a damning refutation of all those who have claimed that the pro-business drive to lift restrictions and force the population to "live with" the deadly virus stems solely from the right-wing proclivities of the Liberal-Nationals and their governments at the federal level and in the state of New South Wales (NSW).

Andrews has made crystal clear that the rush to end lockdowns for all time and to allow the unchecked spread of the virus is a completely bipartisan program. It is supported by the entire capitalist political establishment and aimed at meeting the demands of the corporate and financial elite for the overturning of any barriers to full profit-making activities, whatever the public health consequences.

In its essentials, the plan unveiled by Andrews is identical to that announced by NSW Premier Gladys Berejiklian earlier this month. Both are based on a program accepted by the national cabinet, composed of the state and territory leaders, most of them Labor, and the federal government, which advocates the termination of lockdowns once 70 percent of the adult population is vaccinated and the abolition of almost all remaining safety restrictions at 80 percent.

As in NSW, the Victorian roadmap has been presented, not when infections are declining, but when they are rising dramatically. Daily cases have exceeded 500 and are predicted to reach into the thousands, the same time restrictions would be lifted.

If anything, Andrews is blunter about the catastrophic consequences of his government's own policies and more strident in his insistence that the public must accept mass

illness and death.

The Victorian government released the modelling that supposedly underpins its reopening plan. The data, compiled by the Burnet Institute, indicates that even if the existing lockdown measures were to remain after the 80 percent vaccination target were met, there would be a 24 percent chance of the hospital system being overwhelmed by more patients than its 2,500-bed capacity. Daily infections would peak late next month at between 1,359 and 2,938, with a median of 1,960 cases.

Rather than demonstrating that lockdowns are ineffective against the highly-infectious Delta variant, those figures show the inadequacy of the existing measures. As in almost every Australian outbreak, the lockdown in Melbourne, the Victorian capital, does not extend to workplaces, the primary source of transmission.

Construction, which is patently non-essential, has continued throughout and accounts for around 13 percent of all infections. Cases are centred in the working-class suburbs of the city's north and west, where residents are being forced into unsafe factories and places of employment.

If the reopening proceeds, the Burnet Institute modelling indicates a 63 percent probability that the hospital system will effectively collapse. Maximum hospitalisations in December would range from 1,950 to 4,400, with a median of 3,150, well above capacity. Intensive Care Units would be inundated, with a 58 percent chance that they could not cope with demand.

Between 1,455 and 3,152 people would die, including the eleven who had perished in the outbreak when the modelling was released yesterday. The median projected fatalities, 2,202, are far more than double those predicted if the inadequate existing measures were to be maintained.

Andrews chillingly stated that while the figures were "sobering," they were the "cost" that had to be paid for the reopening. In language identical to that employed by

Prime Minister Scott Morrison, Berejiklian and the most rabid sections of the Murdoch media, he declared: “We cannot permanently suppress this virus... we have got to open the place up because remaining closed forever has its own cost.”

While paying lip-service to monitoring the strain on the hospital system, Andrews made plain that nothing would get in the way of ending the lockdown. “We are opening up, no doubt about that, there will be no turning back,” he said. “We have to normalise this; we have to pass through this pandemic. We cannot have a perpetual suppression of this virus. There will be pain, it will be challenging.”

The pain is to be borne by the millions of workers and young people who will be imperiled with a deadly virus over the coming months.

Teachers and students are on the frontlines. Mass in-person teaching is to begin resuming at the beginning of next month, well before the 70 percent adult vaccination target is met. That figure excludes everyone under the age of 16, meaning it really accounts for around 56 percent of the population.

Children under the age of 12 are not eligible for inoculation, meaning that they have no protection. Vaccines for the 12–16-year-old cohort were only recently approved, meaning the vast majority will not even have had one dose when they are herded into the classrooms.

As has been the case internationally, the Delta variant has hit children and teenagers particularly hard. As many as 500 of the current active cases in Victoria are among children under nine, while in NSW almost a third of all infections, more than 13,000, have been registered in kids and teenagers. Even with schools operating at minimal capacity during the lockdown, primarily attended by the children of essential workers, over 75 have been shut after cases were detected in Victoria, along with more than 200 in NSW.

Despite this, year 12 students will return to Victorian classrooms from October 5 on a part-time basis. Year 11 will resume for three days a week from October 18, along with years 1 and 2 for two days. From October 26, years 7, 11 and 12 will be full-time in preparation for a complete reopening.

As has been the case previously, the Australian Education Union will do everything it can to enforce this program. The union, aligned with the government, has suppressed widespread opposition to unsafe conditions in the schools, throughout the pandemic.

Once the 70 percent target is met, around October 26,

the lockdown will effectively be lifted. Limits on travel will be ended and outdoor gatherings of up to 50 people permitted. Hospitality venues and all retail will be able to open with outdoor service.

The 80 percent mark, likely to be reached in early November, was described by Andrews as the “ultimate end point,” even though the government’s own modelling indicates this is when infections and hospitalisations will skyrocket. In a clear demonstration of the financial interests dictating Labor’s program, Victorian authorities are reportedly rushing to hit 80 percent by November 2 so the lucrative Melbourne Cup horse race can proceed with a mass crowd.

All businesses would be able to fully open, with only minimal density restrictions. Full intra-state travel would be permitted, along with inter-state movement.

The NSW government is preparing to lift its inadequate lockdown at the same time. Its own cherry-picked modelling also predicts that this will “overwhelm” the hospital system. Analysis by independent medical experts has indicated that a “code black” in NSW hospitals, signifying that demand exceeds resources, could span for up to five weeks, not the one or two the government claims.

In other words, the Labor and Liberal-National governments in the country’s most-populous states are pursuing policies they say will crash their respective hospital systems simultaneously. Like their counterparts internationally, Australia’s capitalist ruling elite has openly adopted a policy of mass death and illness, to satisfy corporate profit demands.

The urgent task is to build workplace rank-and-file committees to resist this homicidal drive and to defend health and lives. Such a struggle must be linked to a socialist perspective, aimed at reorganising society to meet social need, not the dictates of the financial oligarchy.



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