

Australia and New Zealand ruling elite demands population “live with” COVID-19

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Experiences in the Asia-Pacific are demonstrating that the eradication of COVID depends on the development of an independent movement of the international working class, fighting for a scientific program that prioritises health and safety, not capitalist profit. With extraordinary rapidity, countries held up as pandemic “success stories” are dispensing with earlier safety measures and adopting the “let it rip” policies that have created a disaster internationally.

In Australia, where the virus has repeatedly been eliminated, governments are rushing to “reopen the economy” amid the country’s worst COVID outbreak.

In New Zealand, one of the few countries to have pursued an elimination strategy throughout the pandemic, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern announced yesterday that her government would be “transitioning to a new way of doing things,” based on the fact that the Delta variant is a “game-changer.”

The *New York Times*, speaking on behalf of the Wall Street banks and corporations, immediately reported the announcement, declaring that: “For a year and a half, New Zealand has pursued a strategy of ‘Covid zero,’ closing its borders and quickly enforcing lockdowns to keep the coronavirus in check, a policy it maintained even as other Asia-Pacific countries transitioned to coexisting with the viral threat. On Monday, New Zealand gave in.”

This was part of a broader shift, the *Times* noted, referencing the drive to end lockdowns in Australia, and the situation in Singapore, where an end to a government strategy of suppressing the virus has resulted in a major outbreak. “The change in strategy by Singapore and other countries in the region has left China as perhaps the last major country to pursue a Covid-zero approach,” it declared.

With a clear air of triumphalism, the *Times* was championing the fact that those countries were adopting the same profit-driven policies that have resulted in mass infection and death around the world.

Infections have soared in Britain since all mitigation efforts were dispensed with on “freedom day” last July, with current fatality rates matching Prime Minister Boris

Johnson’s declaration that 50,000 annual deaths from the virus would be “acceptable.” In the US, thousands of people are dying every few days, while hospital paediatric units are being overwhelmed as 200,000 or more children are infected each week, many of them having contracted the virus in schools that are functioning as lethal Petri dishes.

Case numbers vary in the Asia-Pacific countries that have recently shifted their policy. In Australia and Singapore there are thousands of active infections, in New Zealand, only several hundred. The trajectory, however, once the “live with the virus” policy has been adopted is the same: mass transmission, hospitalisations and fatalities.

This has already been demonstrated by developments in Australia. The country’s governments never sought eradication, rejecting it in the earliest stages of the pandemic as being too costly. Nevertheless, over the past 18 months, they have repeatedly been compelled to institute lockdowns and other safety restrictions.

This has largely been a result of demands from teachers, health staff and other sections of the working class, and because the underfunded hospital system is in such a parlous position that it cannot cope with even a limited COVID-19 outbreak. The country was also insulated to a certain extent by its geographical isolation and stringent border restrictions. Transmission of the virus was repeatedly eliminated, as millions of working people adhered to social distancing and made sacrifices to ensure public health.

Within a very short period of time, the situation has been reversed. The country went from having no cases of community transmission in early June, to more than 84,000 in the three-and-a-half months since, along with 447 deaths. More than a quarter of all fatalities since the pandemic began have occurred since the end of August.

The surge has been the outcome of governments, especially in the state of New South Wales (NSW), resisting calls from epidemiologists for timely lockdowns, instead preparing for a “reopening.” Even once restrictions were imposed, most workplaces remained open, leading to infections and deaths being concentrated in the working

class suburbs of Sydney and Melbourne.

In previous outbreaks, governments have stated that it is not safe to end lockdowns before community transmission is reduced to zero or close to it. Now, the opposite is the case. The higher the case numbers, the more stridently they insist that lockdowns and other restrictions be overturned as quickly as possible, based on the same inoculation levels that have failed to halt surges in countries such as Singapore and Israel.

Last week, Prime Minister Scott Morrison announced that international travel would resume in November, earlier than planned, as the spearhead of a far broader reopening.

The announcement was made days after an article in the British *Financial Times* (FT) declared that “Australia is making ‘big mistakes’ in failing to reopen to the world, with business leaders accusing the government of putting politics before science ahead of a looming general election.” The preeminent mouthpiece of finance capital highlighted statements by business chiefs, who were “Increasingly fed up with COVID-19 lockdown policies” and “have said the nation will have to learn to ‘live with the virus,’ as many other countries have done.”

It is these profit interests that are determining government policy. In NSW, the limited lockdown is to be ended next Monday, despite infections continuing to approach one thousand a day. A full reopening is planned for November-December. The Labor government in Victoria has adopted an almost identical “roadmap,” even though infections in the state have reached a record of more than 1,700 per day, including a jump of 50 percent in a 24-hour period last week.

With the healthcare system already in an unprecedented crisis, official modelling from the NSW and Victorian governments predicts that the reopening will likely “overwhelm” their hospitals. They are preparing to implement a “triage system,” under which some critically-ill patients would be denied care. Medical experts have warned that the protocols would lead to people with an eighty percent chance of survival, if they were treated, being left to die.

In-person teaching is resuming en masse in both states this month, even though 30 percent of all cases in NSW have been among children and teenagers and thousands more young people have been infected in Victoria, during a period when most learning has been conducted online.

As is the case internationally, this program is provoking widespread opposition. Thousands of teachers and students have taken to social media and issued petitions, condemning the reopening of the schools. Healthcare workers have written open letters, denouncing the official policies as creating the conditions for mass death.

It is these sentiments that the various business chiefs are railing against. In countless editorials over the past months, the financial press has insisted that governments must take on the opposition among workers and young people. As one comment in the *Australian* declared, it was necessary to change the “Australian mindset” and force an end to the popular “addiction to lockdown.”

In this, the trade unions have played a central role. They have joined with the corporations to ensure workplaces have remained open throughout the pandemic, have lobbied for “their” industries to be exempted from lockdown measures, and are seeking to suppress any mobilisation against the official pandemic policies.

Critical lessons must be drawn. In one form or other, all of the capitalist governments are turning towards the policies of “herd immunity” and death. The developments in the Asia-Pacific are providing a graphic demonstration of the bankruptcy of official strategies aimed at mitigating the impacts of the virus, without seeking its eradication, and the impossibility of maintaining a program of elimination, within the framework of the capitalist system.

The fight to eradicate the virus, which epidemiologists have explained is both possible and necessary, depends on the development of an independent movement of the working class that asserts the social rights of the population, including to health and life, above private profit. The October 1 school strike in Britain, which won support from thousands of teachers, parents, students and workers around the world, points the way forward.

On October 24, the WSWS is holding an international online webinar featuring leading scientists and workers involved in this struggle, to “explain the case for eradication and provide the public with the critical knowledge necessary to develop a broad-based and international movement to end the pandemic and reclaim the future.”



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