

Omicron explodes in Australia as governments scrap nearly all safety measures

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Acting nakedly at the behest of big business, governments across Australia are rushing to end virtually all COVID-19 safety protections, even as doctors and health experts warn that the extremely-transmissible Omicron variant is taking off “like wildfire,” spreading from mass infection events in Sydney, Melbourne and Newcastle.

Infections, said by health authorities to be “most likely Omicron,” are beginning to soar exponentially in the two most populous states—New South Wales (NSW) and Victoria—following the terrible pattern already seen in South Africa, the UK and Denmark.

As a result of truly criminal decisions taken by governments, Liberal-National and Labor Party alike, millions of people face infection within weeks, leading to possible serious illness or death, and unknown long-COVID health effects. Previous pretences that governments acted on official “health advice” have been ditched to declare that the interests of “the economy” and Christmas profit-making must take priority over public health.

The relentless axing of safety measures, led by the Liberal-National government in NSW and the Labor Party government in Victoria, has created the conditions for Omicron “super-spreader” events in nightclubs and pubs that are seeding outbreaks far and wide.

Such are the ruthless “reopening” demands of the corporate elite that daily announcements of soaring infections are accompanied by a redoubled removal of safety precautions, even QR code check-ins, contact tracing and masking rules that are essential to halt the developing catastrophe.

NSW recorded 1,742 new COVID-19 cases in the 24 hours to 8:00pm yesterday. That figure has doubled in two days and quadrupled in four. It is already the highest number ever recorded in the state in a day, breaking NSW’s previous peak of 1,603 on September 11.

New infections in the state could be running at 25,000 a day by late January, according to modelling conducted at the University of NSW. Such a level would be disastrous, with the sheer volume of cases overwhelming the already over-

stretched and chronically-underfunded public hospital system.

Despite deliberately false claims that Omicron is a “mild” COVID-19 mutation, hospitalisation numbers are starting to rise also. A total of 192 people are in NSW hospital with the virus—up by 30 in a day—including 26 in intensive care units (ICUs).

Victoria, where Omicron has only started to take off in recent days, yesterday recorded 1,622 new COVID-19 cases and nine deaths, the highest toll since late October. This is still largely driven by an ongoing five-month Delta outbreak, but “super-spreader” events involving more than 700 patrons at two inner-Melbourne bars are likely to see the state soon overtaken by Omicron.

The state Labor government of Premier Daniel Andrews yesterday warned Victorians to brace for a “significant increase” in Omicron cases, even as it went ahead with removing safety measures, such as mandatory vaccination requirements for retail outlets, except hair and beauty services.

There are 384 people in Victorian hospitals with COVID-19 infections, of whom 87 are in intensive care and 49 are on a ventilator. A further 35 people are in ICUs but considered “no longer active.” Victoria’s seven-day average for hospitalisations has risen for the past nine days, from 296 on December 7 to 340.

All these figures are certain to be gross under-estimates of the disaster. Massive hours-long testing queues have developed, with people being turned away because of inadequate resourcing. This is dangerously slowing the detection of infections. Contact tracing has been deliberately wound back too, so it is impossible to know how quickly the virus is spreading, and the hospitalisation figures hide the number of patients being treated, some with oxygen cylinders, in their own homes.

Business leaders, media propagandists and politicians, including Prime Minister Scott Morrison and Labor Party leaders such as Anthony Albanese and Bill Shorten, have only ramped up their insistence that everyone must learn to

“live with the virus,” including Omicron and the inevitable next mutations. This really means “live with death.”

Some of the most blatant statements came yesterday at a NSW government media conference. Liberal-National Premier Dominic Perrotet openly defended overriding the advice of the state’s Chief Health Officer Dr Kerry Chant, who urged a continuation of masking requirements. Perrotet said “his team” had considered Chant’s advice, but managing the pandemic was “a balance” and “we are opening up.”

NSW Health Minister Brad Hazzard revealed the 25,000-a-day modelling but then declared: “We’re trying to make sure we normalise, as far as is possible in a one in 100-year pandemic, the way we live our lives.” This is the normalisation of mass infections and death.

Hazzard said he was confident that the hospital system could cope, but that claim was soon exposed. Statistics showed that from July to September less than half of NSW ambulance responses to P1 or “emergency” cases (42.5 percent), including unconscious patients, having an acute heart attack or choking, arrived within 15 minutes. Roughly 40 percent of responses to priority 1A jobs—the most life-threatening category—failed to arrive within the 10-minute target.

Other reports showed that NSW “elective surgery” waiting lists have risen to more than 92,000 people. Under-staffed hospitals face a backlog of patients who have been blocked from undergoing often-essential procedures throughout the Delta disaster that began in June.

Hospital systems are similarly overwhelmed around the country, often suffering ambulance-ramping and patient-diversion alerts. That includes the states that have, until now, remained largely free of COVID-19—Queensland, South Australia, Western Australia and Tasmania.

Some health experts are speaking out but governments are wilfully ignoring them. Epidemiologist Professor Mike Toole of the Burnet Institute said the NSW government’s decision to scrap QR code check-in requirements at supermarkets and retail outlets, along with mask requirements, was “absolutely nuts... We had the health minister saying that modelling shows there could be 25,000 cases a day in January and then you take away from the contact tracers their most valuable tool.”

This apparent insanity is actually calculated. It is driven by the rapacious profit interests of the super-rich, whose fortunes have sky-rocketed during the pandemic at the expense of the working class, which has borne the overwhelming burden of illness and financial stress.

As it has throughout the pandemic, the Labor Party remains in lockstep with the Morrison government and its state counterparts, equally enforcing the demands of the

corporate ruling class. When Morrison again declared yesterday “we must live with this virus,” he was followed by Labor’s Shorten on national television this morning.

Shorten warned state governments against border closures to stop the Omicron spread and other “bureaucratic overkill” in the lead-up to Christmas. That was after a barrage of airline, tourism industry and big business denunciations of the Queensland state Labor government for initially quarantining all travellers from two domestic flights on which a passenger had tested positive for Omicron. Having heard the corporate message, the state government yesterday backflipped within hours.

The infected passenger had come from Newcastle, an industrial city north of Sydney, where Dr David Durrheim, from the local health authority had said the Omicron variant was “spreading like wildfire” at pubs, nightclubs and large events. More than 200 people have been infected from one venue alone, the Argyle Club, and yesterday’s 1,742 NSW infections included 633 from the Newcastle-Hunter region.

Durrheim warned: “The high level of transmission at this event, it’s going to probably be one of the highest-transmission events this year in any single venue, probably anywhere in the world.”

Governments are misinforming people that third-dose “booster” vaccinations will protect them from Omicron, even though the medical evidence so far indicates only about 75 percent efficacy. Moreover, the booster shots will take two to three weeks to take effect, and millions of people are still unable to access the boosters, having to wait five months from their second dose. Only 210,000 booster doses have been administered in the past week, leaving about four million people waiting until late December.

Today’s editorial in the Murdoch media’s *Australian* lay down the law to the governments on behalf of the capitalist elite, insisting that they must defy the growing public and medical alarm. “Easing of mask and movement controls, despite an escalating number of Covid-19 cases, demands leadership,” it declared. “Continued uncertainty risks undermining the economic recovery now under way.”

This ruthless policy underlines the necessity for the Global Workers Inquest into the COVID-19 Pandemic and the fight for a socialist program that places public health, safety and society’s interests above the private profit dictates of the wealthy elites.



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