

Australia: Melbourne's coronavirus outbreak continues to spread despite localised lockdown

By Oscar Grenfell
4 July 2020

A surge in COVID-19 infections in the Victorian capital, Melbourne, has continued over the past days, after the state Labor government reinstated limited lockdown measures on Wednesday.

Health authorities confirmed 108 new infections today, following 66 yesterday and 77 on Thursday. Friday's tally marked the 17th day in a row of double-digit case numbers in Melbourne. Daily infections were higher than 60 throughout the past week.

While the number of confirmed cases is lower than in epicentres of the pandemic internationally, it is clear that significant community transmission is underway. Of yesterday's infections, 17 were connected to known outbreaks, 20 were detected through routine testing and 28 are still under investigation, meaning their source is unknown. Only one case was a returned traveller in hotel quarantine.

Over the past fortnight, the proportion of cases stemming from individuals returning from overseas has fallen sharply, while the overall infection tally has risen rapidly. This indicates that the virus is likely circulating widely in Melbourne, and that the real number of infections is far higher than is indicated by the official figures.

The outbreak is an indictment of the state and federal governments, Labor and Liberal-National alike. All of have insisted over the past month that the virus has been successfully contained and that it is necessary to "reopen the economy" and end the remaining lockdown restrictions.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison and the state and territory leaders, the majority of them Labor, are continuing to announce the lifting of coronavirus restrictions on an almost daily basis. Large gatherings, including sporting events with spectators, are resuming in most states, and caps on patrons in restaurants, pubs and other likely sources of widespread transmission are being eased.

In line with this agenda, the Victorian Labor government of Premier Daniel Andrews resisted calls for the reintroduction of lockdown measures for more than a week after Melbourne's case numbers began to rapidly rise. When it did act, the government rejected proposals for a city-wide lockdown, or for

any measures that would impinge on the operations of most businesses.

Instead, a localised lockdown has been imposed, covering 36 suburbs and ten postcodes in areas that have been deemed "hotspots" of infection.

The suburbs are primarily in the north and west of the city. They are overwhelmingly working class, with higher rates of poverty and unemployment than elsewhere in Melbourne.

Residents of the areas are being subjected to a punitive police response to the health crisis. "Border checks" are being conducted by police units, with those coming in and out of affected areas being interrogated about whether their travel is "essential." They have been threatened with fines of more than \$1600 and arrest if they fall foul of the vague criteria of what is "essential" and what is not.

Workers have told the WSWs that the police presence in the affected areas is pervasive. Hundreds of officers have been mobilised to patrol the "hotspots."

The crackdown is in effect in suburbs such as Broadmeadows, which has been devastated by the shutdown of the car industry, as well as areas with large numbers of immigrant youth, who are routinely subjected to police harassment. It follows a number of recent cases of police violence across the country, and mass protests last month sparked by the police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis.

The claims of the Victorian government that the outbreak could be contained, under conditions where most workplaces are continuing operations and schools are open, has already been exposed as a fraud. As many as a quarter of cases over the past days have been detected among residents outside the lockdown area.

Some suburbs with high rates of infection have not been placed under lockdown. Blatant commercial considerations appear to be at play.

On Friday, Victorian Health Minister Jenny Mikakos revealed that the 3031 postcode was one of four with the highest number of cases over the past week. Despite this, and for reasons that have not been explained, it is not among the ten postcodes that have been locked down.

Significantly, though, 3031 covers the Flemington Racecourse, one of the largest in the country. It is continuing to hold races, without patrons, enabling the multi-billion dollar gambling industry to continue its lucrative operations. If the postcode was placed within the lockdown zone, races would likely need to be suspended.

Some residents in 3031 have pointed to the arbitrary character of the measures. In comments to the media, they have noted that they live only houses away from the 3032 postcode, which has been declared a “hotspot.”

Meanwhile, information continues to emerge revealing government culpability for the outbreak. Health authorities revealed last week that genomic sequencing had shown that many of the recent cases could be traced to private security guards who have overseen hotel quarantines of returned travellers.

A cluster that began in May at the Ridges Hotel in Carlton has led to at least 19 confirmed infections. Another at Stamford Plaza in the city centre has resulted in 35 cases, a figure that continues to grow. These confirmed infections have potentially seeded far more widespread transmission.

The Labor government’s decision to put private security staff on the frontlines of an unprecedented pandemic, is of a piece with the entire pro-business response to the crisis.

Three large companies in the sector were placed in charge of the hotel quarantines in March, without any public tender. Their employees are low-paid, receiving as little as \$25 per hour, including for night shifts. They have told the media that they either received no training, or health instruction that lasted a few minutes.

Andrews has announced that the private security will be replaced by correctional officers and military personnel. This is in line with a broader use of the pandemic, by governments, to expand the police and military presence amid mounting social and political opposition. In an exercise in damage control, Andrews has called a \$3 million inquiry into the use of private security.

The continued operations of workplaces where social distancing is virtually impossible have also contributed to the spike. At least six infections have occurred at Coles’ chilled distribution warehouse in the western suburb of Laverton. Hundreds of other staff were potentially exposed to the virus. Cases have also been confirmed among employees at McDonald’s restaurants in several suburbs.

The resumption of face-to-face teaching last month has heightened the dangers. The union and government enforced reopening of schools was accompanied by claims that they were unlikely to be centres of infection. It was carried out in the face of widespread opposition among teachers and parents. At least 30 schools and childcare centres across Melbourne have been forced to close in the past fortnight, after cases were detected among students, teachers and carers.

To cover-up its responsibility, the Victorian government is

increasingly seeking to scapegoat ordinary people for the growing number of infections. It has vaguely claimed that large family gatherings were responsible for the initial surge, without providing any proof.

On Thursday, government officials asserted that 10,000 people in hotspots had refused testing. Corporate media outlets immediately claimed that they were adherents of conspiracy theories denying the existence of coronavirus. No evidence or further information, however, has been provided.

It appears that some of those who refused tests had already recently been examined. Others may have been fearful of being forced to miss work, under conditions in which many employees do not have paid sick leave. Throughout the pandemic, moreover, testing has been highly restrictive. Only recently have people without symptoms been encouraged to get tests, even when they have come into contact with confirmed cases.

In the face of the escalating crisis, Labor and the Liberal-National Coalition have further deepened the bipartisanship that has been on display throughout the pandemic. Coalition Prime Minister Morrison has publicly congratulated the Andrews government on its response, while the Victorian Labor government has signalled its commitment to the reopening agenda being implemented across the country.

The official parties are coming together to ensure the interests of the financial elite. Their lifting of restrictions has been carried out, not on the basis of health considerations, but to create the conditions for a resumption of corporate profit-making. The unity of the political establishment, moreover, is directed against the social and political opposition that governments know their woefully-inadequate and pro-business response to the pandemic is generating.

To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>