

Australia's COVID-19 spike spreads to New South Wales

By Oscar Grenfell
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There are growing warnings that a surge in coronavirus infections in Victoria over the past fortnight is extending into New South Wales (NSW), the country's most populous state, with its largest city, Sydney.

While daily confirmed cases in NSW are relatively low at this point, similar tendencies that resulted in the Victorian outbreak spiralling out of control and leading to hundreds of daily infections are evident. Rates of community transmission in NSW are rising, virus "hotspots" are being declared and an increasing number of cases are linked to the untraced spread of COVID-19.

As in Victoria, the danger of a full-blown "second wave" of infections is the direct result of the pro-business reopening of the economy by state and federal governments, Labor Party and Liberal-National alike. The NSW Liberal-National government, with the full support of the Labor opposition, has been at the forefront of lifting restrictions on large gatherings, including sporting events, restaurants, pubs and football clubs.

This morning, the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported that health authorities have identified 13 separate "hotspots" or "places of concern" at hotels, gyms, restaurants and retail outlets.

Abrar Ahmad Chughtai, an epidemiologist at the University of NSW, told the newspaper: "We should be taking this very seriously, in the scenario of a pandemic these cases are like wildfire, small spots can spread very quickly if they aren't put out. At this point in time, we can't say it's a second wave but we should be ready for it."

Over the past 12 days, more than 20 infections stemming from community transmission have been reported throughout the state, compared with just six in

June and none in the final week of last month. Monday was the first day since early May that locally-acquired infections outstripped those of returned travellers.

Clusters or potential centres of infection have been identified in the north, east and southwest of Sydney, along with the NSW Central Coast.

As in Melbourne, infections are appearing more frequently in working class areas than at the beginning of the pandemic, when most cases were reported in the affluent eastern and inner-city suburbs of Sydney and were linked to returned travellers.

This was underscored by the announcement this morning that authorities in the state of Queensland, north of NSW, have declared the working class Sydney suburbs of Liverpool and Campbelltown as coronavirus "hotspots." People who have recently visited either suburb will be banned from entry to Queensland, extending a restriction that previously only applied to residents of Victoria. Anyone deemed to have violated the ban could be subject to massive fines and up to six months imprisonment.

The largest NSW outbreak has been at the Crossroads Hotel, a pub in the southwest Sydney suburb of Casula. The number of cases linked to the cluster grew by ten over the past 24 hours, bringing the total to 28.

Indicating possible widespread transmission at the hotel, some one thousand people who live in the vicinity of the hotel have been asked to self-isolate. Concerned people have lined up for hours for testing at a pop-up clinic in the hotel's carpark. Reportedly, the hotel did not record the identities of hundreds of patrons as required by the limited public health measures.

A Kmart store in Casula was closed overnight after an employee tested positive. An individual linked to the Crossroads cluster went to the Star casino in the

Sydney city centre. The casino, which has a gross annual revenue of almost \$2 billion, was later fined just \$5,000 for violating restrictions by allowing patrons to stand together and mingle while consuming alcohol.

Some 12 defence force personnel are in isolation at the air force base in the regional town of Wagga Wagga after having visited the hotel. At many as 30 Australian Border Force guards at Sydney's Villawood detention centre, where refugees are imprisoned, also have been potentially exposed.

Health authorities have not identified the "patient zero" or first infection at the hotel, meaning that the outbreak is not under control. There has been speculation that an interstate truck driver may have carried the virus. Because the hotel is frequented by truck drivers, experts have warned that the contagion could be spreading throughout the state.

Another nearby pub, the Picton Hotel, was closed yesterday after it emerged that an infected individual had visited its gaming rooms several times. A pop-up clinic at the site has been inundated, with reports this morning of queues of cars spanning 1.4 kilometres as people wait for tests.

The NSW state government has responded to the rising case numbers with a handful of cosmetic changes that do nothing to reduce the dangers. The number of patrons allowed at hotels and establishments at any one time has been reduced from 500 to 300, while the maximum size of group bookings for pubs and restaurants has been lowered from 20 to 10.

The government and the corporate media have feigned outrage at scenes of crowded venues and large lines of customers outside them, blaming individuals. But governments have actively encouraged an end to social distancing by allowing establishments to have hundreds of people on their premises. This also has greatly complicated any attempts at contact tracing.

All governments, moreover, have proclaimed for the past two months that Australia had "escaped the worst of the crisis." They hailed their own reopening of pubs and restaurants as being part of a "return to normality," as they lifted restrictions and encouraged people to leave their homes more often.

The *Australian* reported today that, at a cabinet meeting last night, NSW Liberal Premier Gladys Berejiklian "and her colleagues, including Treasurer Dominic Perrottet, agreed that the economy was now

the priority and this could not be compromised."

The Murdoch-owned paper stated: "There was a very strong view that to avoid going backwards, there needed to be a strategy for managing panic. Her cabinet effectively prioritised the economy over everything else."

This is in line with the commitment by both Labor and Liberal-National governments, working together in the "national cabinet," to not halt their "back to work" drive, regardless of its health consequences.

The same strategy has resulted in the surging infections in Victoria, which grew by another 270 today, along with a rapid rise in hospitalisations and warnings of more deaths.

This agenda is being dictated by the financial elite. Its sole purpose is to create the conditions for a resumption of corporate profit-making, including by forcing broad sections of the workforce into their places of employment, despite the dangers of mass transmission.

Meanwhile, governments are overseeing a stepped-up offensive against the social conditions of the working class, with limited pandemic wage and welfare subsidies to be lifted in September. Union leaders are working with corporate executives and governments in tripartite groups to plan a sweeping pro-business overhaul of industrial relations and workplace conditions, to make ordinary people pay for the deepest crisis of capitalism since the 1930s.

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