Close Australian schools to stave off coronavirus! Form action committees of teachers and school staff!

The Committee for Public Education
18 March 2020

The Committee for Public Education calls on all teachers and school workers in Australia to form Action Committees and develop the widest democratic discussion on the necessary measures to protect the health and wellbeing of education workers and students. We demand the immediate suspension of the education system, including primary and secondary schools, universities, tertiary education institutions and child-care centres, as an emergency step to prevent the further spread of COVID-19.

Across Australia, as in the US, Europe and other regions, the official response to the coronavirus has been marked by delays, mixed messages, obvious incompetence, and, above all else, indifference to the safety and wellbeing of the working class. This was once again underlined by the announcement this morning that the federal government and all state and territory governments have "agreed" that schools will remain open.

This malign neglect finds sharp expression within the Australian education system. Teachers and education workers are in one of the highest at-risk professions, yet they are being kept in the dark. They have been denied any opportunity to collectively discuss what is happening and are effectively being told that they must be prepared to sacrifice their own health for the good of the capitalist market. The teacher unions—including the Australian Education Union (AEU) and the New South Wales Teachers' Federation (NSWTF)—function as nothing but subservient messengers for government and education department officials.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison declared last Sunday that schools should remain open, stating: "As the British chief medical officer observed over the last couple of days, the issue of wide scale closure of schools, it may be anti-intuitive, but the advice is this could be a very negative thing in terms of impacting on how these [disease] curves operate. When you take children out of school and put them back in the broader community, the ability for them to potentially engage with others increases that risk."

These are false, self-serving and dangerous arguments. Children would only be "put back" in the "broader community," instead of being at school from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., because governments at all levels are refusing to implement a comprehensive plan to mitigate the pandemic.

Such a plan must include providing full income compensation for all workers who need to stay at home to mind their children during school closures, and providing free and individualised child care for health and emergency workers who are courageously risking themselves by treating people affected by the pandemic.

Daniel Andrews, the Labor premier of Australia's second largest state, Victoria, declared more than a week ago, on March 10, that a school system shut down is "inevitable."

Teachers need to raise the question: if this is the case, why the wait? The real agenda is to maintain a stable workforce for as long as possible, so the corporate elite can extract maximum profits ahead of a national shutdown necessitated by the collapse of the underfunded national hospital system. And in the meantime, as far as the ruling class is concerned, school workers' health be damned.

While school systems in some other countries have been shut, those actions mirror the approach by every government to the pandemic as a whole—ad hoc, uncoordinated, country by country, state by state, school by school decisions, with no unified approach from the standpoint of the protection of teachers, students or the population as a whole.

In Australia, some private, independent and sectors of the Catholic system are closing down against the recommendations of the government. The rich private and Catholic schools have the resources to do so, putting in place online learning activities and support measures for the families with vulnerable children.

Australia has one of the most unequal education systems of all the advanced capitalist countries. Forty percent of all high school students now attend private schools, a consequence of policy measures enacted over decades by successive Labor and Liberal governments that have starved public schools of resources while pouring billions of dollars in public subsidies to private institutions—including elite institutions that charge up to $40,000 a year in tuition fees.

The principal of Geelong Grammar, one of the richest private schools in Australia, stated last week that it was being "intentionally proactive" by closing down.

There is no such proactive response in the public sector. Instead, teachers are being made responsible for the health of children under conditions in which decades of government funding cuts have left them without even the most basic resources. Teachers at numerous schools are reporting that there is not even soap for either staff or students, while cleaning is substandard. Some teachers have been told to buy the soap themselves and they will

© World Socialist Web Site

be reimbursed, sometime in the future.

Wealthy families have the option of their children online-educating from homes equipped with the best internet access, high quality computer facilities, guaranteed decent meals and access to private doctors and hospitals when necessary. They can wait out the epidemic.

For working-class families, on the other hand, weighed down with mortgages and general living costs, there is no choice but to send their children to school each day unless they do not go to work or ask grandparents or friends to look after them. Countless numbers of elderly people and those who are immune-compromised could be endangered as a result.

Teachers have been systematically denied any real voice or input into issues of curriculum and pedagogical practice, with education departments determinedly seeking to force public school educators into functioning as unquestioning implementers of every official edict. Now the same pressure is being brought to bear with the coronavirus.

On the Victorian Australian Education Union Facebook page, a purported update on the situation posted last Monday triggered more than 180 comments. Many respondents were angered by the initial responses of the AEU to different questions about teacher safety, including its insistence that teachers individually telephone the union to receive an answer.

One educator wrote: “You’ve stood by as the government has made us out to be glorified babysitters. Not once have they come out and suggested that being in school is the right option as it provides normality, that their education is a priority, nope, instead you’ve stood by and not uttered a word as everyone says schools should remain open so ‘businesses’ can continue [...] No consideration at all to teachers who you are meant to show some concern for, who spend more time ‘looking after’ bankers and business people’s kids rather than their own.”

The status quo is both unsustainable and unacceptable. The Committee for Public Education insists that in the face of a public health emergency, the voices of teachers and education workers must be heard!

This will certainly not emerge via the teacher unions. Anger is building over the unions’ failure to call for the closure of the schools or even insist on elementary measures to ensure the safety of their members. In some schools, teachers are calling meetings, passing resolutions and threatening to carry out mass resignations from the union if they fail to act.

The health and safety of educators cannot be left in the hands of the government and unions. Teachers, academics and child-care workers need to act independently and form Action Committees in every school, university and every community! In the schools, parents and students in more senior levels must, of necessity, be included in all discussions and decisions.

The CFPE proposes that the following demands be considered and voted on by Action Committees, which in the event of a school system closure should utilise online meetings to ensure teachers and educators are not isolated from one another or students and their parents. Action Committees should democratically discuss and decide on any other steps they consider necessary.

* For as long as schools and universities remain open, they must become centres of **mass coronavirus testing**, for children, families, teachers, students, and school workers.

* The closure of the country’s school system must be preceded by guarantees of **100 percent income protection** for every person who is compelled to stay at home to mind their children.

* **Free and high quality computer and internet access** must be guaranteed to every family, to ensure that accessibility to online learning provisions are not dependent on wealth. Any household without internet access or an individual computer for each student in the home must be provided with these basic rights immediately, without charge.

* **Publicly funded psychologists** and other health professionals must be made available to children at risk from the disruption and potential trauma of their interrupted education.

* **Guaranteed income must be provided to all education workers** during what could be an extended closure, including all graduate teachers without sick and long service leave, casual relief teachers, all education support staff, and contract staff.

The guiding principle must be that the shutdown of the education system to minimise the spread of the coronavirus is not an individual or a family-based responsibility, but a **social responsibility** .

The sweeping measures necessary will require tens of billions to sustain. Any claim there is “no money” is the self-interested lie of a wealthy corporate aristocracy and the Labor and Coalition governments that serve it.

Two stimulus packages of more than $17 billion has been announced by the Coalition government, unashamedly to prop up business. The Committee for Public Education insists that funds be made available to meet the coronavirus crisis, through sharp increases in taxation on the income of the corporations and the wealthy, and the redirection of the billions of dollars allocated to defence, to pay for the measures needed to sustain the closure of the education system and for the desperately needed funds for the health system.

Within the education system, the two-tier class system must be abolished, with free and high-quality public schooling made available to all, to allow the full flourishing of every individual child’s intellectual, cultural, artistic and physical capacities.

None of this is possible without the development of a political movement uniting the international working class against the capitalist system. We encourage all educators and school workers to contact the CFPE to develop this discussion and begin immediately forming Action Committees.

Teachers and education workers can contact the CFPE via email at cfpe.aus@gmail.com or on our Facebook page: www.facebook.com/commforpubliceducation/. The CFPE Twitter account is https://twitter.com/CFPE_Australia.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site