Australian governments refuse to close schools over COVID-19

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Public schools have become the epicentre of the demand by all Australian governments—federal and state—that workers must stay on the job, especially in factories, offices, child care centres and education services, regardless of the rapidly worsening coronavirus pandemic.

At a media conference, Prime Minister Scott Morrison yesterday repeated his insistence that there would be no closure of the schools, despite the country's officially-reported number of COVID-19 infections spiralling past 1,000 and doubling every three or four days..

He urged the entire population to "keep going," despite the lack of testing, hospital resources and other urgent measures to protect public health.

Morrison had just been backed by a "national cabinet" meeting of Liberal-National and Labor Party federal and state government leaders. They rejected growing calls from teachers and school staff for a system-wide closure, with Morrison claiming this was "in the national interest."

On this basis, millions of students and their teachers in crowded classrooms, along with other school staff, will continue to risk exposure to the coronavirus, as will childcare and university workers.

Morrison's invoking of a "national interest" is a fraud. The pandemic has exposed the sharp class divide between the ultra-wealthy oligarchy, whose interests the political establishment serves, and the working-class majority. The governments have made billions of dollars available to large corporations and financial markets, while doing nothing to alleviate the escalating distress of working people.

This class divide finds its clearest expression in the public school system. Schools are being kept open, because this is another mechanism to minimise disruption to the capitalist market. It allows business to extract as much profit as possible ahead of an all but inevitable wider lockdown.

Yesterday it emerged that a teacher and student from Adelaide's Unley High School had tested positive for coronavirus. Authorities claimed that the two had not been contagious while at the school, so it remained open. Morrison just brushed this aside, saying a "single transmission was not unexpected."

Many medical experts have urged the closure of schools, as is happening in other countries. Yale University Professor Nicholas Christakis told *sciencemag.org*: "Proactive school closures—closing schools before there's a case there—have been shown to be one of the most powerful non-pharmaceutical interventions that we can deploy... It's not just about keeping the kids safe. It's keeping the whole community safe."

Even though the federal and state governments imposed restrictions to both indoor (100 persons) and outdoor (500 persons) gatherings, they excluded schools, which have up to 2,000 students.

Morrison referred to Singapore's decision to keep its schools open, saying it had been "one of the more successful countries" in containing the coronavirus.

The reality is that Singapore, after the 2003 SARS disaster, developed a publicly-funded medical infrastructure, including mass testing capabilities and quarantine procedures. These were activated when the first COVID-19 cases emerged. School children have twice daily temperature screenings, the first before entering school, in addition to other health checks. Classrooms and canteens are routinely cleaned, and exam-style seating has been provided to keep students apart.

Nothing comparable has been done in Australian schools. There are no virus tests, no temperature checks, and in many instances, insufficient soap and disinfectant. The two-tier nature of the education system has been further exposed, with many wealthy private schools (to which governments give enormous sums of public money every year) deciding to close down or adopt special protective measures.

Anger is escalating across the school system, directed not just against the governments but the teacher unions. The unions—including the Australian Education Union (AEU) and NSW Teachers Federation (NSWTF)—have backed the governments and done nothing to defend the safety of students and school staff.

As well as parents, teachers are speaking out, in defiance

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of gag orders aimed at shutting them up. There have been numerous instances of intimidation by principals and education departments and threats of disciplinary action.

• Last Thursday more than half the staff of Footscray High School voted to resign en masse from the AEU if it took no action to shut down the schools. They called for both campuses of their school to be closed as "unsafe" workplaces. The meeting overwhelmingly supported the immediate formation of a workplace Action Committee, independent of the union. At the same school, another teacher initiated an open letter, signed by nearly 50 teachers, calling on the state Labor government to immediately close the school or make "dramatic and substantial" changes to protect staff and students.

• Twenty-five teachers at a primary school in Sydney's northwestern suburbs this week unanimously passed a motion calling on the NSWTF to demand "the closure of schools in recognition of the fact that 'social distancing' is proving impossible to implement in a school setting. No worker or their family should be exposed to unacceptable Work Health and Safety risks."

• At an Adelaide high school, whose students are all immigrants and refugees, school staff passed an AEU sub-branch resolution demanding the school's immediate closure. "There is hardly any hand sanitiser available, although some has been ordered we are told it will take over a month to arrive," the resolution explained. "We are trying hard to educate students to wash hands, but there are hardly any wash basins, and certainly not enough for 500 people to wash their hands several times a day."

• At a school in Victoria's Wimmera, 18 staff resolved to gather signatures from schools across the rural region for a petition demanding a school system shut down.

• An online petition demanding that all schools and childcare centres be shut down for urgent community safety, with full pay for all staff, has collected more than 4,000 signatures. Many similar petitions are circulating online.

• On social media, teachers expressed their anger with the unions. Hundreds posted messages on the AEU Victoria Facebook page. One teacher wrote: "We are not babysitters nor are we here to sacrifice our health (and worst case scenarios our life) to prop up the economy. The AEU needs to stand up for their members and advocate for our safety. The complete disregard for the teaching profession shown by the State and Federal governments AND the AEU is beyond my angry words."

• Some teachers are essentially refusing to go to work. The Australian Broadcasting Corporation today reported that 22 teachers at The Grange, a primary and secondary college in the Melbourne working-class suburb of Hoppers Crossing, had called in sick. "Some are pregnant, undergoing chemotherapy, dealing with conditions that compromise their respiratory or immune systems or have family members who are ageing or sick," the ABC reported.

Last Thursday, the AEU tried to cover its tracks by writing to the prime minister, purportedly expressing multiple "concerns" of school workers. Far from demanding the closure of any schools, the letter requested "detailed advice" on how to minimise health risks.

The Committee for Public Education (CFPE) has called on all teachers and education workers to form Action Committees, independently of the unions, and develop the widest democratic discussion on the measures needed to protect the health and well-being of workers and students. It insists that the education system be immediately suspended as an emergency step.

Full income compensation must be paid to all workers who need to stay at home to mind their children during school closures. Free and individualised child care must be provided for health and emergency workers, who are risking themselves by treating people affected by the pandemic.

Governments claim there is "no money" to do all this, but they are handing billions of dollars to the banks and businesses. These resources must instead be directed to meeting the urgent social needs and combatting the deadly virus.

We encourage all educators and school workers to contact the CFPE and develop the fight for these essential demands.

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