

An interview with an Australian school teacher fearing coronavirus exposure

Our reporters
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The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with a casual relief public school teacher and member of the Committee for Public Education (CFPE), who may have been exposed to the coronavirus at work.

The teacher's situation underscores the urgency of the CFPE's demand for the immediate closure of schools and for teachers and school workers to form Action Committees. The widest discussion must be developed on necessary measures to protect the health and wellbeing of education workers and students (see: "Close Australian schools to stave off coronavirus! Form action committees of teachers and school staff!").

The teacher's name has been withheld to protect student privacy.

WSWS: Can you describe your potential exposure to the coronavirus and the official response?

Casual teacher (CT): This week a child in my classroom was sent home after displaying symptoms consistent with the coronavirus. The official response was entirely complacent. I don't believe the child's temperature was even taken before being sent home.

I was advised that the family would monitor the child's health and if it worsened then they would see a doctor. They were not advised to seek testing for the coronavirus. No broader protective measures were taken—at least not yet. But I'm still following up the issue.

Of course the child might simply have had the flu. But to assume that without any medical assessment struck me as highly irresponsible. This is not a question of an individual school but reflects the government's utter indifference to the health of working people.

Schools are on the front line of the coronavirus epidemic—they are now one of the few places where hundreds of people are congregating every day within a relatively small space. But teachers and school staff

haven't been provided with effective information about what should be happening.

At-risk teachers, including those who are over 60, pregnant, immune-compromised, or who live with these people, are not being provided with extra protection. They are being told to turn up to work along with everyone else.

Some school principals have announced additional measures, such as hiring more cleaners and staggering recess and lunch breaks to reduce the numbers of children in the yard at the same time. Other principals have declared business as usual and done nothing.

I know of one school where a staff meeting was held to train teachers for online education in the event of a closure, and the principal refused to allow any discussion about the safety of staff while the school remained open.

It is a total disaster in the making, like an Italy-type health catastrophe.

WSWS: What happened when you sought advice about your possible exposure to coronavirus?

CT: I rang the National Coronavirus Helpline that the federal government has set up. I asked if I should seek a test or self-isolate. I was only told to monitor my health, and if I felt unwell, then go and see a doctor. This contradicts what I have read about people with the coronavirus being contagious before they display any symptoms.

The person on the helpline didn't even ask for the name of the school where I had worked or take my name and contact details. The so-called helpline is another piece of political theatre. The absence of mass testing and failure to properly monitor potential cases means the real rate of contagion must be far higher than the official figures.

WSWS: What will it mean for you to self-isolate?

CT: If I stop working, which I think I should, contrary to the official advice I was given, I have no income. Of course, the government, like the others around the world, has rushed to bail out big business. Trump's given Wall Street \$1.5 trillion, Morrison has pledged to fork out public money to different corporations as required, nearly a billion dollars for the airlines the other day. But there are no resources available for ordinary people.

I know that casual, contract and "gig economy" workers are now a massive proportion of the total workforce, but nothing has been provided for those of us affected by the pandemic.

WSWS: Can you speak about working conditions for casual relief teachers?

CT: Our work is highly precarious. Partly this is the nature of the job. When classroom teachers wake up in the morning feeling too unwell to go to school, casual teachers need to be available at short notice. But the insecurity is exacerbated because we don't have a properly funded and rationally planned education system.

For example, classroom teachers' training days ought to be planned in advance, with relief teachers given proper notice, but this almost never happens. Also the organisation of relief teaching is privatised. Most schools use contract agencies. The one that hires me skims off nearly a quarter of my wage as profit.

In the middle of a pandemic, relief teaching is among the highest risk occupations. Not only do we move from school to school. Sometimes within a day we move from classroom to classroom each hour as required. I have estimated that in the last couple of weeks I have been in close proximity to about 240 children, including young ones, whose personal hygiene and respect for personal space sometimes isn't great.

That number is counting only those I have shared a classroom with for an hour or more. If I added children I've been around while doing yard duty, the number would probably be approaching 2,000. But there has been no advice or assistance issued to casual teachers by the education department beyond the universal recommendation to wash your hands often.

WSWS: What do you think of the role of the education unions?

CT: I think teachers need to draw some lessons from

the total failure of the unions to do anything whatsoever to protect the health of their members during the coronavirus crisis. I'm guessing that union officials are now enjoying their \$200,000-plus salaries while safely working from home. In the meantime, teachers and school workers are having their health and safety endangered.

The unions are complicit in the undermining of the public education system, the imposition of NAPLAN, the development of crushing workloads and every regressive policy imposed on schools.

WSWS: What do you think should happen, given the coronavirus epidemic?

CT: I agree 100 percent with the Committee for Public Education—the school system needs to be immediately closed across the country, with proper measures put in place to assist working parents who will face significant challenges.

Teachers can't wait for the situation to get worse. They certainly can't trust the governments, education departments or the unions. We need to form Action Committees to discuss the necessary emergency measures. I think we need to prepare walkouts right away.



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