

“Life before profits—close the schools down!”

Australian teachers and school workers speak out on dangerous working conditions amid pandemic

The Committee for Public Education
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There are widespread demands among educators across Australia for the closure of schools to protect the safety of teachers and students amid the coronavirus pandemic.

Teachers’ outrage is directed not only at the federal and state governments and education departments, but also the teacher unions, for their inaction and complicity with the effort to keep the schools open as a means of allowing the continued extraction of corporate profit ahead of a total lockdown (see: “Australian state of Victoria shuts down school system, other states remain open”).

On March 18 the Committee for Public Education (CFPE) posted the statement, “Close Australia Schools to stave off coronavirus! Form action committees of teachers and school staff!”

The CFPE has since received emails and comments from teachers in the public, Catholic, and independent education sector, explaining the situation in their schools. In a desperate effort to silence teachers, education departments and some school principals have warned teachers against speaking to the media.

Reflecting the demands of the federal and state governments, some school administrations are using bullying tactics and threats of disciplinary action. As a result, these comments of teachers and education support staff must remain anonymous.

A primary school teacher in Melbourne:

This week our union sub-branch met to discuss the COVID-19 virus. Staff were concerned about the lack of discussion and support. Some staff seemed to be unaware of the magnitude of the situation, possibly because we have been told that it is “business as usual” at schools.

We have had no support in addressing the well-being of our students, let alone ourselves. I arrived at school on Monday with no direction about how to speak about this to the students. I was feeling unsure, as so many developments had unfolded over the weekend.

My young students arrived telling stories to try to understand

it—some said they might have the virus, others said they could see it in the street. We had a discussion to support them, assure them that they are safe, that we can take steps to stay safe, including washing hands, etc.

I felt the enormity of keeping these little kids safe and keeping them calm, while addressing their fears and trying to help them navigate the information they were sharing.

Meanwhile, they were sneezing, coughing, touching, blowing in each other’s faces and just being kids. I was lucky to have some hand sanitiser in my room as a parent had donated it at the beginning of the year. Other classrooms have no soap and water or sanitisers.

A staff meeting was called to discuss the provision of online learning if schools close. Website after website was shown, we were bombarded with access codes and instructions. More pressure on us. Meanwhile at that point there had been no discussion about the safety of staff, including the most vulnerable, including pregnant teachers. Several staff have now taken leave out of concerns for their health.

The union has done nothing to support teachers. This is a matter of life and death, yet we are treated with disdain and deliberate neglect.

A public school teacher in Sydney:

There have been no union meetings at the school. Teachers in my faculty are very concerned and are texting each other hourly about developments with the government and the union. The attitude of the principal is that everything is under control. This is definitely not the case—schools are being left in chaos.

While keeping the schools open, we are being asked, in our own time, to completely reorganise the way we teach. We are meant to be developing online and remote leaning skills. This is all while schools are still open. So, we have to teach the 30 percent who are at home plus the remainder who are at school—this is a major workload issue.

I heard a report from an Australian now living in Italy who said that what was happening in Australia now was a rerun of

what took place there two weeks ago: delay and a refusal to follow the advice of medical authorities, with the crisis not being taken seriously.

It's becoming obvious that for the government and the unions, people's lives are simply collateral damage. I fully agree with the CFPE call for Action Committees of teachers, support staff and parents, to firstly discuss measures to resolve this crisis, starting from the interests of workers and their families. This is absolutely urgent.

An education support staff member at a Melbourne secondary school:

At my school, there is a pervading sense that teachers and educational support staff have become cannon fodder for the coronavirus. The Australian government's refusal to provide the necessary social welfare, to enable parents to look after the children at home under lockdown, may end up being a death sentence for staff and students. I personally feel very susceptible due to the nature of my work (integration disability services), and at risk of passing the disease on to my family.

As a collective we feel deeply let down, not just by the government but also our alleged representatives in the union. They have shown themselves to be intent on following the government line and forcing us to remain open. They seem only to be concerned about protecting their own positions and image. If we're forced to reopen after the school holidays then I feel the staff will have to go on strike in order to protect the lives of staff and students.

A secondary teacher in a Melbourne Catholic school:

At my school, students are fully aware of the incredible contradiction between the social distancing measures being announced by the government—banning inside gatherings of more than 100 people, the requirement of 4 square metres surrounding each person inside—and the insistence that schools remain open.

The VIEU (Victorian Independent Education Union) bureaucracy has acknowledged in its public statements that the measures of social distancing recommended for schools are totally unrealistic and cannot be implemented in a school setting. It also recognises the lack of necessary antiseptic hand wash. It even says in its statement that the health and well-being of its members is being put at risk due to the inadequacy of the preventative strategies. Yet they do not call for the closure of schools.

The unions have stated: "The rate of transmission in Australia is still extremely low, and current evidence suggests that children present a relatively low transmission risk. This may change—and we will change our position if we think the health of our broader membership is being put at risk... In the meantime, we have a vital role to play, not as childminders, but as educators, carers, community leaders, and role models."

In other words, teachers are being ordered to be role models by subordinating their own health and safety to the needs of the capitalist class. This is war-time propaganda.

A teacher from a Sydney independent school:

The situation at my school is very troubling. Our principal has made clear that we will not shut down until the government makes an order. School events, performances and parent-teacher interviews were cancelled, but classes are all proceeding.

There has been no official staff meeting to discuss the dangers. Emails have been sent to staff directing us to implement social distancing, hand-washing procedures and general cleaning. Cleaners have been called in to do some extra cleaning, but teachers are expected to keep the areas they use clean. I am not aware of any cleaning material being provided.

Members of staff have said they are worried about the lack of safety concerns for teachers, but the focus and pressure on us is to keep the business running so that the school can survive economically. But our lives, and the lives of our families, are at risk.

For those teachers over 60 with pre-existing medical conditions who are even more at risk, nothing has been said. One of my friends raised they were unable to teach face-to-face, and provided a doctor's certificate. The principal questioned the non-attendance at school saying, "but you're not sick!"

Everything is being left to the individual teacher to fight these battles, and it can be quite intimidating when you are in a one-on-one situation with your principal. The IEU (Independent Education Union) admits they have been inundated with queries from anxious members—but union officials have not been near the school.

We should not be expected to work in these unsafe conditions, and students should not be expected to go to school either. Life before profits—close the schools down!

Teachers and school workers can contact the CFPE via:

Email cfpe.aus@gmail.com

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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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