

Australian state of Victoria shuts down school system, other states remain open

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23 March 2020

Yesterday the Labor Party government in Victoria, Australia's second most populous state, announced the temporary closure of its school system from Tuesday, citing the coronavirus pandemic. New South Wales (NSW) Liberal Premier Gladys Berejiklian announced that she would not close schools, while declaring: "We are encouraging parents to keep their children at home." The Labor-Greens government in the Australian Capital Territory said its schools would shift to on-line learning from Tuesday.

Following a hastily-called meeting last night of the "national cabinet," involving state and federal leaders, Prime Minister Scott Morrison insisted that all schools should remain open. He insisted that all children "should go to school tomorrow" and for the remainder of the school term, asserting that there had been "no change" to official health advice.

In a bid to intimidate parents, Morrison claimed: "Parents will be saving lives if they send children to schools."

Accordingly, other states and territories are maintaining regular school operations. Many parents, however, are keeping their children at home, while increasing numbers of teachers, especially the most vulnerable, are refusing to go to the schools.

This chaotic situation reflects the wider disarray and criminal neglect in the ruling elite's response to the coronavirus crisis.

Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews said yesterday that the school closure was a necessary public safety measure. "This is not something that we do lightly, but it's clear that if we don't take this step, more Victorians will contract coronavirus, our hospitals will be overwhelmed and more Victorians will die," Andrews said.

The measures came after a spike in confirmed COVID-19 cases nationally. In Victoria, 67 additional cases were confirmed on Saturday, bringing the state total

to 296, with those affected coming from different parts of the state capital of Melbourne, as well as multiple regional towns and cities.

Andrews said he was acting on advice from Victoria's chief health officer, which has not been made public, and that further advice would be sought when deciding if the second school term would resume as scheduled on April 15.

No clear explanation has been given as to why schools in NSW are remaining open, despite the state being the worst affected by the pandemic, with 533 confirmed cases by last night.

Likewise in Queensland, where confirmed coronavirus cases rose by 60 yesterday to a total of 319, Labor Premier Annastacia Palaszczuk has declared that schools will remain open indefinitely, despite her government imposing a supposed lockdown yesterday. The Queensland Teachers Union has requested the government shut schools by mid-week. In the face of widespread anger among teachers, QTU President Kevin Bates warned the government that he "could not rule out" strike action being taken if backroom "negotiations" fail.

The prime minister has insisted that the schools remain open in "the national interest" and cited the government's Chief Medical Officer Brendan Murphy as the decisive authority.

Last night, however, Murphy conceded: "We don't know whether children spread this virus. There is no data on that ... We are not ruling it out. It is possible. But we think the risks and benefits are on the other side."

Children spread cold, flu and other viruses, so to throw doubt on their ability to spread coronavirus flies in the face of the necessary precautionary approach. The absence of detailed data on the issue reflects the rapidity with which the pandemic has developed internationally.

What is known from previous pandemics and the coronavirus contagion strongly suggests that enclosing

children together in schools and other confined spaces can accelerate the infection rate.

In a letter published on March 18 in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, 25 doctors and medical experts from the Chinese Paediatric Novel Coronavirus Study Team explained that data from Wuhan Children's Hospital demonstrates "a spectrum of illness from SARS-CoV-2 [COVID-19] infection in children." Some showed no symptoms, while others who had co-existing medical conditions required "intensive care support and invasive mechanical ventilation."

The federal government's insistence that schools remain open is not based on prioritising public health and safety. Rather, the ruling class calculates that having teachers act as child minders is necessary to allow the corporations to extract as much profit from their workers as possible ahead of any total lockdown.

The entire political establishment is responsible for endangering the lives of millions of ordinary people. Victorian Premier Andrews is now posturing as a champion of public safety after his school closure decision. The decision, however, has not been accompanied by the necessary wider provision of welfare and social services.

Parents and caregivers who need to stop working to mind their children need to be provided 100 percent income compensation, as well as teachers and other school workers, including those working casually. Services must be made available for health and other emergency workers who cannot leave their workplaces to mind children at home. None of these measures are in place.

The Labor government's decision to close the schools was made with an eye to the threat of school teachers and other staff taking strike action or other self-defence measures, in opposition to the Australian Education Union.

A ferment is developing within the schools across the country (see: "Australian governments refuse to close schools over COVID-19"). The latest inconsistent federal and state government announcements have fuelled the anger.

On social media, hundreds of teachers and school staff have expressed their bitter opposition toward the governments and the trade unions, which have just echoed government and education department talking points.

In one Facebook group, a member of the NSW Teachers Federation (NSWTF) wrote: "I have been a member of federation for 30 years. I am about to cancel my

membership." Another replied: "Me too and I've been a member for over 45 years."

Numerous teachers are demanding strikes and walkouts.

Teachers are defying attempts to intimidate them into shutting up. On Facebook, one asked: "So who else got a 'friendly' reminder about code of conduct and commenting on social media!" Another replied: "Give them a friendly reminder about providing you with protective equipment."

Another teacher wrote: "Now is not the time for worrying about being censored. We need solidarity and to fight for what's right. I am happy to face disciplinary measures anyway, now that I have seen how little the government values teachers. It could stop me from returning to something I fundamentally oppose. Worry about later on later on, now, keep the groundswell going for shut down. We cannot stop the spread with schools open, and teachers as well as students and their families' health is at risk."

The task confronting all educators and school staff is to develop a collective response through the formation of Action Committees, independent of the teacher unions.

The Committee for Public Education (CFPE) issued this call on March 18, in a statement demanding 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.

Action Committees must develop the widest democratic discussion—utilising social media and online meeting software—on the necessary measures to protect the health and wellbeing of education workers and students. This includes organising strike action across the country.

Teachers and school workers can contact the CFPE via:

Email cfpe.aus@gmail.com

Facebook

<https://www.facebook.com/commforpubliceducation/>

Twitter https://twitter.com/CFPE_Australia



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact