

Australia's national cabinet targets teachers to ramp up back-to-work drive

Mike Head
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Prime Minister Scott Morrison launched a vindictive attack on school teachers yesterday, denouncing them for opposing demands that they return to classrooms under unsafe conditions, regardless of the worsening global COVID-19 pandemic.

His remarks came straight after the latest meeting of the national cabinet of federal, state and territory leaders. Teachers, along with school students and parents, are being pushed onto the frontline of the escalating big business drive to get all workers back inside workplaces.

This is despite the danger of clusters of coronavirus cases and deaths, such as in western Sydney and northern Tasmania, with the national death toll now passing 80 and the infections nearing 7,000.

Speaking on Sky News, Morrison took direct aim at teachers, condemning them for allegedly not being like other workers—from bus drivers to supermarket staff—“who are going to work” each day despite the risk of contracting the potentially fatal disease.

In reality, all teachers are working every day and governments have prematurely reopened schools physically already. Most teachers, backed overwhelmingly by parents, however, are teaching online because of their concern for the health and lives of themselves and students.

But the Liberal-National Coalition government and its Labor partners are determined to push all teachers and students back into classrooms as fast as possible, making them guinea pigs for a wider push to reopen all workplaces without adequate safety measures.

At his post-cabinet press conference, Morrison said all the government leaders, the majority of whom are from the Labor Party, had agreed to “update”—that is, reverse—the previous requirement, restated a week earlier on April 16, that social distancing rules apply in schools.

“National Cabinet agreed with updated Australian Health Protection Principal Committee [AHPPC] advice

on schools,” Morrison announced. “AHPPC does not believe however, that the ‘venue density rule’ of no more than one person per four square metres is appropriate or practical in classrooms or corridors, nor maintaining 1.5 metres between students during classroom activities.”

Despite many governments around the world keeping schools closed, or re-closing schools, to avoid students spreading COVID-19 to others, the national cabinet said it was dropping the “density rule” because there was “very little evidence” of transmission in schools. Plus a preliminary study in New South Wales had reportedly shown a low risk to students.

The attack on teachers is the spearhead of a bipartisan “return-to-work” push, like that in the US, Europe and elsewhere. The national cabinet signed off on 10 “safe workplace principles” by which the trade unions will collaborate with employers and governments in devising “industry-specific” rules to override social distancing precautions throughout all workplaces.

Morrison made this thrust explicit. Answering a journalist’s question about the wisdom of getting workers “back on public transport, crowding our cities,” he declared: “I would love to see a return to normal right across the board. Of course we want to see that. And that includes people going to work in offices.”

Reflecting the rapacious demands of the financial elite, Morrison asserted that productivity was suffering because parents were working from home, while looking after their children. “And so when we can get back to the point where we can have kids back at school, and we can get people back at work, then I think we’re gonna see that also lift our economy in ways that we very much need.”

In response to the national cabinet decree, teachers’ unions are stepping up their efforts to beat down the outrage and resistance of their members. Queensland Teachers Union President Kevin Bates, for example, said his union would consult with that state’s Labor

government. On the same day, the Independent Education Union finalised a deal to allow private schools to slash the pay of non-teaching staff by 25 percent for at least 12 weeks.

In his Sky News interview, Morrison expressed a desire to extend the cooperation of the unions, led by the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU). The unions have backed the massive handouts, exceeding \$325 billion, to big business, agreed to slash pay and conditions for millions of workers and kept workers on the job in factories and construction sites. They are being relied upon to suppress workers' opposition, especially on large building sites.

Yesterday, the *Australian Financial Review* reported: "Behind the scenes, the government has sung the praises of the CFMEU [the Construction Forestry Mining Maritime and Energy Union]." That was because the supposedly militant union "had bent over backwards to keep construction sites operating." This has included censoring and denouncing building workers for objecting on Facebook to unsafe crowding on sites.

The Coalition and Labor governments, which are basically running the country by bipartisan decree through the national cabinet, are counting on the unions to help use the mass unemployment and financial crisis triggered by COVID-19 to police a wholesale economic restructuring and offensive against workers' jobs, pay and conditions.

In his Sky News interview, Morrison reiterated his recent calls for the crisis to become a "harvesting period" for all the previously-stalled demands of big business, such as slashing the company tax rate from 30 to 25 percent for the largest corporations, deregulating the economy and making workplace relations "flexible."

Referring to earlier such demands, including in Productivity Commission reports, Morrison stated: "When I say we're at a harvest, well, let's put all this stuff on the table again and let's look at the things that we think can best work."

Treasurer Josh Frydenberg held an online hookup with corporate chiefs on Wednesday to start fleshing out this agenda. Those on the call included Shemara Wikramanayake (Macquarie Group), Mike Henry (BHP), Matt Comyn (CBA), Peter King (Westpac), Ross McEwan (NAB), Rob Scott (Wesfarmers), Andy Penn (Telstra), Stephen Cain (Coles), Mark Steinert (Stockland), Susan Lloyd-Hurwitz (Mirvac), Mark Vassella (Bluescope), Frank Calabria (Origin), Brett Redman (AGL), Jeanne Johns (Incitec Pivot) and

Business Council of Australia President Tim Reed.

In these ruling class circles and media outlets, the focus is on securing a barrage of "reform" measures not seen since the Accords between the unions and the Hawke and Keating Labor governments of the 1980s and 1990s. "This will require similar levels of co-operation between unions and business," the *Australian Financial Review* explained.

The Accords of Hawke and Keating led to a vast and historic transfer of wealth from the working class to the financial elite. They marked the transformation of Labor and the unions, like their counterparts worldwide, into an industrial police force that works to overturn the past gains of workers in order to help make "their" national capitalist economy "competitive" on the world market.

The new wave of restructuring has begun already, with the complicity of the unions, which have blocked any fight back by workers so far. This includes the forcing of Virgin Australia Airlines into liquidation, threatening 16,000 jobs, sweeping changes at Australia Post, which are certain to cost thousands of jobs, and massive job cuts in universities.

To underline Labor's partnership in implementing this offensive, Morrison ended yesterday's press conference by announcing that parliament would return for a pared-down session on May 12–14. This had been agreed to by the Labor Party "last night at our regular weekly get-together." Morrison added that the government "would seek to work through with the Opposition in advance" the "COVID-related bills."

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