

Oppose the rush to reopen Australian schools! Form safety action committees of teachers and staff!

The Committee for Public Education (CFPE)

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The Committee for Public Education (CFPE) calls on teachers and school workers across Australia to form action committees to protect the safety and wellbeing of students and staff threatened by the coronavirus pandemic.

State and federal governments are stampeding teachers and students back into classrooms with blatant disregard for public health. Prime Minister Scott Morrison and all the state Labor and Liberal premiers have admitted the reopening of the schools and the wider economy will result in new infections and therefore possible deaths. This is a price they are willing for workers to pay.

For the ruling elite, the reopening of the schools is regarded as a vital component of the drive to force the entire workforce back onto the job to allow for the maximum extraction of profits. Financial commentators have declared that the cost of eradicating the virus is too high when weighed against the needs of big business, while others have developed “death calculus,” whose purpose is to demonstrate that measures to save lives are too expensive.

The CFPE has opposed this reckless campaign. Where they are now open, we demand that the school systems be suspended in states and territories where there is community transmission of COVID-19—at this stage, primarily Australia’s two most populous states, New South Wales (NSW) and Victoria—a situation which could rapidly change.

The NSW Liberal government ordered the resumption of full school operations from May 25, without even the pretence of consultation with education workers and parents, giving them just a week’s notice to prepare. A parent in western Sydney responded by initiating a petition, since signed by more than 9,000 people, which demanded that children not be treated as “guinea pigs” for dangerous government policies. When she announced the reopening last week, Premier Gladys Berejiklian declared that “a return to full-time face-to-face teaching is safe.” This has been immediately exposed as a lie. Just a day after students returned, two Sydney schools were forced to shut down after one student from Year 5 at Moriah College, and one from Year 7 at Waverley College, tested positive for coronavirus.

In Victoria, the state Labor government opened the schools on Tuesday for students in pre-primary, Years 1 and 2, and Years 11 and 12. All other grade levels will return on June 9. Premier Daniel Andrews previously indicated that the school system would not be opened until after the end of Term 2, June 26, but abruptly reversed his position. As in NSW, community transmission of the virus is seeing new cases detected every day. The state capital Melbourne had one of the country’s worst clusters, with more than 100 infections originating at the Cedar Meats plant in recent weeks. A teacher at Keilor Downs College returned a positive test last Friday.

The forced reopening of the schools, based on Prime Minister Scott

Morrison’s politically- motivated claim that social distancing was not “required” or “appropriate” in schools, expresses the ruling elite’s contempt for the safety of working people. Scientists are still learning about the coronavirus pathogen and how it is transmitted. While there is some evidence that children are less likely to spread the virus, other reports indicate otherwise. A French study this month found that coronavirus antibodies were eight times more prevalent within a local school than in the broader area where a cluster occurred. The partial reopening of French schools last week immediately resulted in 70 new infections among pupils and teachers. Many of these schools have now been forced to close again. Another German survey revealed that infection rates were similar across all age groups of the population, including children.

Medical scientists are now grappling with an extreme illness affecting children that is related to COVID-19. Labelled paediatric inflammatory multi-system syndrome, it has potentially fatal symptoms that resemble those of Kawasaki Disease.

The state and federal government rush to forcibly reopen the school system in these circumstances amounts to criminal negligence, provoking anger and growing opposition among teachers and parents. Teacher surveys for months have revealed substantial numbers of teachers opposed to the reckless opening and concerned with safety. Many others have taken to social media to denounce the government and refute assertions that there is low risk in the schools, with some also condemning the unions for their silence and collusion with the government.

The official rationale, that children’s education is too valuable for them to miss any more schooling, is a contemptible fraud. The very politicians who have shed crocodile tears over the difficulties of children from poorer and vulnerable families in accessing online learning are themselves responsible for the social and economic crisis wracking the working class. While tens of billions have been handed out in so-called bailout money to big business and finance capital, ordinary people have received a pittance or nothing at all.

The coronavirus pandemic has, moreover, exposed the two-tier education system in Australia, which is among the most unequal in advanced capitalist countries. Some 40 percent of all secondary students attend private schools, the outcome of hundreds of billions of dollars being funnelled into the private sector by successive Labor and Liberal governments. Public schools remain starved of the necessary funding, in many cases lacking resources for basic infrastructure such as habitable classrooms and learning equipment.

The teacher unions are complicit in the drive to reopen all schools. They have nowhere acted to defend the safety and wellbeing of teachers and school staff. Bureaucrats have instead rushed to offer their services to state and federal governments, collaborating with them at every stage of

the official response. The unions supported keeping the schools open at the first stage of the pandemic crisis and then helped enforce the crushing workload burden on teachers that accompanied the shift to online learning when the schools were closed. Now they are lining up in support of the reopening drive.

In the May edition of the Australian Education Union's Victorian branch magazine, state union president Meredith Peace criticised Prime Minister Scott Morrison, saying he "had altered health advice" on social distancing to "suit his political position." Within hours of the state Labor government's announcement of a staggered reopening of the schools, however, the union "welcomed" the staggered return to work, stating "the announcement would give certainty to teachers, principals and support staff, and marks the beginning of the end of what has been a challenging time for everyone involved."

The teacher unions' actions parallel the role of the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU), which has closely collaborated with federal and state governments against the interests of the working class. ACTU secretary Sally McManus has been involved in near daily talks with the federal government since the crisis began. She has overseen the gutting of awards covering more than three million workers in the clerical and hospitality industries, providing for the slashing of penalty rates and expanded working hours. This is a deepening of the role of the unions over the past four decades in imposing the demands of governments and the corporate elite for the destruction of full-time jobs, the lowering of wages and erosion of working conditions.

Teachers and school workers need to organise in defence of their interests independently of the unions. This is why the CFPE calls for the formation of safety action committees in every school, comprising teachers, education support and administration staff, parent and family representatives, and delegates from related workplaces, such as public transport. Bus, tram, and train workers are also potentially endangered by large numbers of students commuting long distances to their schools, with proper social distancing not maintained.

At stake is not just the immediate public safety concerns in the face of the coronavirus pandemic, but the future of the education system. Guided by the cynical adage of never letting a good crisis go to waste, governments will no doubt seek to advance permanent online learning and other restructuring measures in the next period, increasing teachers' workloads, cutting wages, undermining progressive pedagogical approaches and opening up new opportunities for edu-businesses. Victoria's education minister James Merlino declared on Tuesday that he had commissioned an "independent analysis" of the online learning period, explaining, "when you look at how schools have responded, there is gold... and we've got to mine that gold and make it a feature of our education system."

In opposition to this drive, safety action committees, independent of the unions and employers, must formulate and implement measures that are necessary to protect the safety and lives of teachers, students, and the broader community. A prerequisite for ensuring teacher and student safety is accurate scientific information, not politically driven misinformation promoted by governments and unions. Democratically controlled committees, made up of trusted educators and parents, should oversee and monitor working conditions and call immediate stop works if safety is violated. Teachers must not be sacrificed or used as guinea pigs to facilitate corporate profits.

The CFPE proposes the following measures:

- To prevent the further spread of COVID-19, school systems must be closed in states and territories where community transmission is underway. Waiting for infections to emerge, and then closing schools on a case-by-case basis is not acceptable! This will only serve to facilitate the spread of the virus and sabotage efforts to eliminate live cases of the disease nationally. Teachers and school workers in Victoria and New

South Wales need to organise, through action safety committees, a public campaign within the working class for the closure of the schools as an emergency public health measure.

- Any teacher or school staff member who tests positive for COVID-19 should be properly quarantined and provided with the means to do so including separate accommodation on full pay. Family members and those in contact with the infected person should also be tested and provided with full medical care on full pay.

- In other states and territories, to the extent that medical scientists are confident that there is no community transmission of the coronavirus and that adequate mass public testing and contact tracing facilities are in operation, schools should function as mass testing centres. Regular, if not daily, testing of all school staff and students must be organised. Social distancing measures must be implemented in every school, requiring substantially reduced class sizes and the employment of thousands of new full-time and relief teachers.

- In addition, action safety committees in every school must ensure that education departments and principals are providing all staff with proper personal protective equipment and other supplies required to ensure safety. Nurses and medical professionals must be allocated to every school. Thousands more cleaners, provided with proper cleaning equipment should be employed to stop the spread of the virus and to overcome decades of neglect in public schools. Teachers and students should not be expected to clean to make up for inadequate government funding. All medical staff, cleaners and other personnel who attend schools must have the PPE that they need.

- No teacher should be victimised for calling attention to unsafe conditions! Teachers' voices must be heard and acted on to protect safety and lives. All gag measures, such as public service codes of conduct, that restrict teachers from speaking publicly about what is happening in the schools must be eliminated. Ongoing information must be provided of COVID-19 outbreaks at schools.

- No teacher who chooses to remain working from home due to health concerns should be penalised in any way. Hundred percent income protection must be provided to every person who is compelled to stay at home to mind their children. Guarantees must be provided that teachers will not be pressured to take personal leave including long service leave entitlements. A permanent income must be made available to contract teachers, education support staff and relief teachers.

- Workloads must be reduced, including through lowered face to face teaching hours. Teachers should not be expected to do both online learning and in-class teaching, adding to an already unbearable workload. Those continuing online learning must be provided with extra time and professional development and technical assistance to develop online skills.

- For students and families, free and high-quality internet access must be provided to all households, to ensure that online education can continue. Publicly-funded psychologists must be made available to students who are at risk from the disruption and potential trauma of their

interrupted education.

The sweeping measures necessary will require billions of dollars to sustain. Any claim there is “no money” is a self-interested lie, promoted by a wealthy corporate aristocracy and the Labor and Coalition governments that serve it. The vast sums that have been transferred to the financial elite since the pandemic began must be redirected to public education, healthcare and to meeting the social needs of ordinary people.

These demands, crucial to ensuring the safety of educators and of all workers, can only be realised through a political struggle against state and federal governments, and the capitalist profit system they defend. The experiences of the past months have demonstrated that the basic social rights of workers are incompatible with a society subordinated to the dictates of big business.

The CFPE calls for the widest discussion among educators on the necessity for a socialist program, which would involve the establishment of a workers’ government, the transformation of the banks and largest corporations into publicly-owned utilities under the democratic control of the working class and free, high-quality education for all from kindergarten to the tertiary level.

We encourage all teachers seeking to fight to contact the CFPE.

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