

Organise teachers, parents and school staff committees to oppose reckless school reopening in Melbourne!

The Committee for Public Education (Australia)
7 July 2020

Amid the worst coronavirus outbreak in Australia since late March, the Labor government in the most affected state, Victoria, had planned to send teachers, school staff and students back into classrooms when holidays end on July 13. Late today, as COVID-19 infections hit a new peak, Premier Daniel Andrews announced a partial one-week extension of the school holidays for some students in Melbourne, but not the rest of the state.

The delay in reopening schools in no way changes the reckless and dangerous character of government policy and must be opposed. The Committee for Public Education calls on teachers, parents and school workers to organise safety action committees and demand the suspension of the school system in the state as part of a comprehensive public health and safety plan to protect the working class.

Across Australia and internationally, teachers and workers need to form rank-and-file safety committees to take action to bring the worsening pandemic under control. Mass action by the working class, coordinated on a global scale, is necessary to save millions of lives that are now at risk.

Term 2 in Victoria concluded on June 26, just as community transmission of COVID-19 began to escalate in several working-class suburbs of northern and western Melbourne. On June 30, the state Labor government of Premier Daniel Andrews announced a month-long partial “stay at home” lockdown affecting 36 Melbourne suburbs and around 311,000 residents.

On July 3, three inner suburbs were added to the lockdown list, including nine high-rise public housing estates. For at least five days a “hard lockdown” is being imposed on more than 3,000 residents, who will be literally locked inside their flats in those estates. Hundreds of police are now stopping people entering and leaving these areas.

In the past three weeks, more than 33 schools and a dozen kindergartens have been closed across Melbourne due to students and educators testing positive to COVID-19. The outbreaks were initially contained within northern, western and southeastern suburbs but now new outbreaks have been revealed in outer west and inner suburban schools. Since June 26, 24 schools have closed for “deep cleaning,” with several schools and childcare centres experiencing two or three outbreaks.

At Al-Taqwa College in the outer-west, which has 2,000 students and 300 staff, 90 students and staff members have tested

positive. The college is the first school community to be placed into quarantine, with all students and staff being tested for COVID-19 and self-isolating for 14 days.

Despite this extraordinary situation, the state government, backed by the federal Liberal-National government of Prime Minister Scott Morrison and the Australian Education Union (AEU), insists that it is safe for all primary and secondary schools to resume next week.

Preparations to railroad teachers back into schools are based, not on considerations of public safety, but economic production and corporate profit. The political establishment regards keeping the schools open as critical to ensure that coronavirus response measures do not adversely affect big business. Teachers and school staff are being treated as expendable child minders, used to ensure that their students’ parents can continue to attend workplaces.

The months-long misinformation campaign of Morrison and Andrews, insisting that opening schools amid a pandemic is safe because children are less susceptible and less infectious than adults, has been thoroughly exposed. Last week, Victorian Chief Health Officer Brett Sutton acknowledged there was worrying “evidence of student-to-student and teacher-to-teacher, especially teacher-to-teacher, transmission.”

Just two days earlier, Andrews had declared: “We are seeing no real evidence of transmission between kids and adults [and] no real evidence that school attendance is a big driver of the spike in cases.”

The government and the media are clearly attempting to downplay the seriousness of the situation. There are no published government tallies of the total number of school closures, nor are the numbers of teachers and students testing positive consistently released. In recent weeks, nearly every day, the media has announced school closures daily but then quickly dropped the news of each outbreak. Such is the lack of information that parents are ringing talk-back radio to report school closures that governments have not announced.

In these circumstances, the claim by state and federal governments that reopening schools remains safe, expresses their complete indifference toward the lives of educators and students. Numerous experiences internationally underscore the dangers. In Israel, to take just one example, in early June, just two weeks after

returning to full schooling, more than 100 schools had to be closed again as COVID-19 infections rapidly spread, including in one school where 116 students and 14 teachers got sick.

While children are less susceptible to serious COVID-19 symptoms than older people, they are not immune. Medical scientists also are continuing to investigate a serious and painful coronavirus-related disease affecting some young children, known as multisystem inflammation syndrome (MIS-C), which in the US has required intensive care treatment for previously healthy children.

The out-of-control catastrophe now unfolding in the US, Brazil, India, the UK and many other countries underscores the danger of initially low COVID-19 infection rates escalating dramatically as a consequence of government inaction and indifference.

In New South Wales, the most populous Australian state, school outbreaks are reportedly fewer than in Victoria, at this stage, with seven schools closed since a full return to face-to-face teaching. COVID-19 is not contained by state borders, however, nor stopped at the school gate. The rapid spread in Victoria is warning to school staff and parents in every state and territory.

Teachers cannot simply wait upon events. Nor can they place any trust in the teacher unions. The primary function of the union bureaucracy throughout the pandemic has been as a messenger for state and federal governments, and their education departments. Up until late last week, despite the wave of school outbreaks, the union had not uttered a word of concern. This is despite the fraudulent claims of AEU president Meredith Peace, in the latest union magazine, that the health and safety of members has “been top of the list.”

Last week, Peace made the extraordinary statement, reported in the *Age*, that schools “had not experienced significant problems with transmission after returning from remote learning.” Asked about the possibility of temperature checks in schools, she said the “jury was out” on whether this was an effective measure. At this point, the AEU has made clear its support for the scheduled reopening of the schools on July 13. At every step, the AEU has backed the government, without a word of criticism, contemptuously dismissing through its actions the concerns and anger that have emerged among its members.

From the beginning of the pandemic, the Committee for Public Education has sought to mobilise teachers independently of the union and employers.

Our campaign in defence of teacher and student safety—grounded on the best available scientific knowledge and prioritising the needs of the working class over the demands of the corporate elite—has been vindicated by the latest developments. On March 18, as national daily new coronavirus infections neared their peak of that month, the CFPE issued a public statement demanding, among a range of comprehensive emergency measures, 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.”

On May 28, as state governments were rushing to reopen the schools, the CFPE issued a statement demanding that “school systems must be closed in states and territories where community

transmission is underway.”

These demands were issued not as pleas to the state and federal governments but as calls for action from below. The CFPE reiterates our call for teachers, parents and education workers to form safety action committees in every school in Australia. Contact the CFPE and we will extend every assistance in this necessary work!

The situation is especially urgent in Melbourne, the current epicentre of the pandemic in Australia. Teachers cannot allow themselves to be used as guinea pigs in an experiment that is ultimately aimed at ensuring the continued flow of corporate profits. Teachers must use the time provided by the term break to develop the widest democratic discussion among themselves, sharing accurate scientific information and forming the closest connections between schools, parents and the community as action committees are built.

These committees also will need to discuss the complex series of measures necessary to support families and working-class communities as schools remain closed until the coronavirus pandemic is contained. The guiding principle must be that the provision of the necessary financial, logistical, medical and other support is not an individual or a family-based responsibility, but a social responsibility. This will require substantial additional public expenditure on social and medical infrastructure.

Enormous sums are available—as the government’s aggressive \$270 billion military expansion announced last week demonstrates. But directing the resources required to defeat the coronavirus pandemic, and to provide a universal, high quality public education system for all, requires a struggle against the capitalist profit system and all its political defenders.

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

Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com

Facebook: www.facebook.com/commforpubliceducation

Twitter: @CFPE_Australia

The author also recommends:

Broader reopening of the schools in the UK leads to spread of COVID-19 infections

[30 June 2020]

Parents speak out about the rushed reopening of the schools in Australia

[16 June 2020]



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact