

“Schools should not be opened if it puts people at risk”

Australian teachers back US educators’ fight for independent rank and file safety committees

Our correspondents
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Australian school teachers and staff recently spoke to the Committee for Public Education (CFPE) to voice their support for teachers, school workers, parents, students and others across the United States of America who are taking the initiative to form an Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee there.

The purpose of rank-and-file committees is to unite educators with young people, parents and the entire working class to oppose the reopening of schools amidst the expanding coronavirus pandemic.

Any return to in-person learning threatens the health and lives of entire school communities, along with their friends and members of their families. It has already produced catastrophic consequences in spreading the COVID-19 pandemic, which is raging out of control throughout the world, and especially in the US.

Penelope, a secondary teacher from Melbourne, Victoria, explained: “During the onset of the coronavirus pandemic here in Australia, teachers struggled to convince our employers and the union to support us as we attempted to keep ourselves, our students and our families safe. We are aware, however, that you [in the United States] have faced far more serious threats.”

Penelope also spoke about the Trump administration’s recent announcement that teachers were deemed part of “critical infrastructure” and were being forced to suppress positive COVID tests. She said, “This concealment puts teachers, students and communities at risk and is possibly illegal. We are shocked and appalled at this. Your communities need to be aware of the risk teachers are being forced to take in terms of their health, their careers and their freedoms. They have the right to know that parents, other workers and the wider community face the

same risks. Suppression of information of these risks is undemocratic.”

Indicating her support for the demands being advanced by the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee in the US, Penelope said, “Schools should not be opened if it puts people at risk. Teachers must not be compelled to work in unsafe conditions. We support your efforts to refuse to open schools until they are safe and we share your belief that every child has the right to a safe, free education of the highest standard, and wish you every success in maintaining your stand.”

David, a secondary teacher from rural NSW, voiced his concerns at the lies being used to justify the reopening of schools. He said, “The fairy tale that young people do not transmit COVID-19 is not based on science; rather, it is based on the push to reopen the economy in the interests of profit. Governments all over the world have based their reactions to this pandemic on anti-scientific lies that have caused death and suffering at unprecedented rates.

“Teachers and students have borne the brunt of this cruel and anti-scientific experiment with the premature reopening of schools leading to the further spread of the virus through major outbreaks in schools in Sydney and Melbourne. Continuing under this current strategy, we can only expect the death and suffering caused by this virus to be prolonged. In the midst of the greatest health crisis in at least the last 100 years governments have revealed their ruthless indifference to human suffering.”

In addressing the formation of rank-and-file committees, David said, “Workers must unite to form the strongest possible resistance against being forced into these dangerous conditions. We must form safety committees and oppose this criminally negligent response

to the pandemic by demanding that face-to-face learning cease immediately, and not be resumed until community transmission has been defeated. If these demands are not met, then general strike action of US educators should be undertaken with the full support of the members of the CFPE, and of the Socialist Equality Party internationally.”

A **Queensland public school teacher** said, “It is with horror that I continue to look on from abroad and witness the re-opening of schools in the USA by the Trump administration. We know that children are not immune to the deadly effects of COVID-19. How dare the future generation be put into direct mortal danger! Educators know that schools can act as a catalyst for the spread of COVID-19. How dare they make us endanger our family and friends!”

“I pledge my support to the teachers of the USA and around the world who stand against the re-opening of schools where active community transmission of COVID-19 is evident. Form rank-and-file safety committees, protect yourself, your students and the greater community!”

Julianne, an education support staff member in Melbourne, also commented on the dangers posed by the reopening of schools. “The evidence speaks for itself, having over 180,000 students from March contracting COVID-19, and 90 children dying from COVID in the US,” she said. “Teachers and education support staff are at risk too, as children do spread the virus as well. All that governments are worried about is the profits that they won’t make if schools don’t open. They are not concerned about people’s welfare.”

Speaking in support of the rank and file committees, Julianne said, “I support the teachers in the US demanding that all schools close immediately and all students have adequate internet access for their learning. Schools should not reopen until they are proven to be safe.”

Campbell, a secondary teacher in regional Victoria, said, “Teachers, who are on the front lines of re-opening the economy, face the sharpest and most acute decisions in the coming period. Their concerns over the health and safety of their students, their communities and themselves, needs a political response.”

Campbell continued, “The call for a national strike is the only way forward for teachers and other workers. To drive this agenda, teachers need to remove any belief that their union leaders will lead a path forward. Teachers need to take that decision-making out of the hands of the union bureaucrats, and set the agenda themselves by

setting up independent rank and file committees.”

Comparing the situation in Australia to that facing teachers in the US, Campbell said, “We have witnessed in Australia that, with schools forced to re-open, there has been a dramatic increase in community cases. There is now a clear and established risk that has been identified with the re-opening of schools and transmissions in the community.”

Speaking of the necessity of forming independent rank and file committees Campbell said, “The union’s role is to fragment action and try to localise and defray the energies and anger of workers into dead-ends. They only act on behalf of their political masters. The drive to expand teachers’ actions to the level of a national strike is a first step. As an Australian teacher, I fully support your growing actions in ensuring your safety, and the safety of the communities you work in.”

Lily, a Melbourne primary school teacher, expressed her anger at the program of reopening schools. She said, “What an outrage to send teachers back in the US—it is nothing short of criminal. Teachers, parents and students have been fed so many lies about this virus from the get-go; that schools are safe, children only have mild cases and do not spread the disease. They have been proven wrong time and time again.

“I am in full support of a national general strike. The governments across the world, particularly in the US, have proved time and time again that they do not care for workers, only profits. They are scared of workers being united because of the power we have—we need to rally together and stand up for safe working conditions! This pandemic has showed the weakness of the capitalist system, of the unions and their pro-business and pro-profit agendas. Without rank and file safety committees we have no advocates for our safety or conditions.

“I offer my full support to the US educators and the Florida rank and file safety committee and hope for a change to the flawed system that puts the lives of educators at risk. We need a global solution and I hope my fellow educators around the world do the same.”



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