

Australian Education Union endorses re-opening of schools in Melbourne

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9 September 2020

As the state Labor government of Daniel Andrews prepares to re-open schools from October 12, the Victorian branch of the Australian Education Union (AEU) has signalled its full support. The return to onsite learning, beginning for Years Prep-2 and 11-12, is part of the Andrews government's "roadmap" out of the COVID-19 lockdown to open up the economy for corporate profit.

Melbourne has become the epicentre of COVID-19 outbreaks and deaths in Australia, with the second wave of infections triggering "stage four" lockdown measures from August 2, involving overnight curfews, the closure of retail, cafes, gyms, hotels and restaurants, mandatory mask wearing and schools teaching online. The situation is the outcome of the negligent policies of both the state and federal governments, and the trade unions, who collaborated in the premature lifting in May of restrictions imposed during the pandemic's "first wave," including the reopening of schools and the resumption of onsite teaching.

Immediately after the state government's announced "roadmap" out of the current lockdown, the AEU stated on their Facebook page: "we are pleased with the cautious approach taken by the government and that a staggered return to on-site learning has been announced, including improved flexibility for schools in regional and rural Victoria and Melbourne so they can manage that return."

The statement made no reference to teacher safety, merely referring to the need to address "challenges" in reopening the schools and for school staff to be "appropriately supported." Nor was there any mention of the disasters that have accompanied the forced opening of schools internationally amid the pandemic, with countless teachers and school staff falling seriously ill and dying from COVID-19 as a consequence.

The AEU bureaucracy elaborated on its orientation two weeks ago, at a regional union meeting in the Melbourne

suburb of Maribyrnong that was attended by more than 40 teachers. Union president Meredith Peace explained that AEU officials had been holding weekly meetings with senior education department officials during the lockdown. She said that in the event of a government decision to re-open schools the union was in favour of a staggered return, which she claimed had proven "effective in the past."

Effective for whom? While it may have been effective for the government and big business to get teachers back on site, as part of the drive to re-open the economy, for teachers and students the opposite was the case. The reckless return to onsite learning at the end of May led to more than 70 school closures due to COVID-19 outbreaks with some schools forced to close several times, as hundreds of teachers and students tested positive.

Peace was challenged about her claim of reopening "effectiveness," under conditions where one cluster at Al Taqwa College in the outer western suburbs of Melbourne had involved more than 200 teachers and students being infected. The state's chief health officer acknowledged that "there had been worrying evidence of student to student and teacher to teacher transmission" at the school.

Peace dismissively responded: "I am not going to get into discussing Al Taqwa. Al Taqwa is not one of our schools." What she meant, but did not elaborate on, was that teachers at Al Taqwa are members of a different teacher union, the Independent Education Union, and do not pay dues to the AEU. So, as a consequence, Al Taqwa College teachers were of no material or financial interest to the AEU and what happened to teachers and students there was irrelevant.

Peace also declared, "Sorry we don't run the government, we don't get to make the decisions, we don't get the opportunity to agree or disagree with the chief medical officer."

In other words, as far as the union is concerned, teachers

must blindly accept the diktats of governments. They have no right to question or make their own collective judgements or decisions on issues concerning their safety and well-being. If teachers were to accept Peace's logic, educators would have no right to question any aspect of what takes place in schools—including on working conditions, class sizes, high stakes standardised testing, or the ever-growing intrusion of edu-businesses. Teachers should just accept, without a word of criticism, whatever the authorities decide constitutes educational policy.

Throughout the pandemic, the teacher unions have straitjacketed teachers and worked to sabotage any independent mobilisation in defence of educators' and students' safety.

Near the peak of the "first wave" of coronavirus infections in Australia, on March 21, the AEU wrote to Prime Minister Scott Morrison, expressing multiple "concerns" about school workers' conditions. Far from demanding the closure of schools, however, the letter requested "*detailed advice*" on how to minimise health risks, including negotiating "*supplies of toilet paper and cleaning materials.*"

Four days later the federal AEU leaders met with Morrison, for what he described as "positive" discussion on arrangements to force most teachers to remain in the classrooms. Morrison heaped praise on the unions stating: "We are working with the national education union... I thank them for their cooperation today and the very good spirit that they and many other unions around the country are working together with us."

On April 24, the "national cabinet," made up of Liberal and Labor politicians, intensified the campaign to bully educators back on site. Reversing previous government policy, Morrison declared he had new scientific research that it was not "appropriate or required" for teachers and pupils to follow social distancing guidelines. In the May edition of the AEU's Victorian branch magazine, Meredith Peace criticised this statement, saying Morrison "had altered health advice" on social distancing to "suit his political position."

However, within hours of the Victorian Labor government's announcement of a staggered reopening of the schools, the union "welcomed" the reopening, claiming that "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 have never challenged the pseudo-scientific arguments that schools are safe amid the

pandemic, and that students have a low risk of infection and transmission.

When outbreaks began emerging in schools across Melbourne shortly after the reopening in late May, the AEU sought to suppress the scale of the crisis, issuing no statements and releasing no data on the school closures and infections of teachers and students. In early July, Peace falsely asserted that schools "had not experienced significant problems with transmission after returning from remote learning." This statement amounted to a criminal cover-up.

The record makes clear that the union functions as the willing and active accomplice of the government and the education department. The union bureaucracy's aim is to defend their own material interests and privileges, to have a seat at the table alongside other representatives of the ruling elite, and there is no line they will not cross to do that. Before educators are once again recklessly forced back into schools under unsafe conditions, they need to carefully review the role of the union and the experiences of teachers internationally who are being driven back into schools amid skyrocketing infections, with deadly consequences.

From the beginning of the pandemic, the Committee for Public Education (CFPE) has called for the formation of rank-and-file safety action committees of educators, school staff, parents and broader sections of the community, independent of the unions, employers, and governments. This is now more urgent than ever before and we encourage teachers and school staff to contact the CFPE to discuss the necessary measures to protect their safety and that of their students.

Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com

Facebook: www.facebook.com/commforpubliceducation

Twitter: @CFPE_Australia

The author recommends:

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

[7 July 2020]

The global campaign to reopen schools and the international strategy of the working class

[4 September 2020]



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