

Australia: Unions silent as dozens of New South Wales schools are affected by COVID-19

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Since the beginning of Term 3, on July 21, at least 32 schools in the Australian state of New South Wales (NSW) have been forced to close temporarily after staff or students returned positive COVID-19 tests.

These closures have gone virtually unreported by the corporate media, assisted by the complicity of the trade unions covering teachers. In many cases, despite government promises of “deep cleaning,” schools have been swiftly reopened.

Schools in NSW reopened for face-to-face teaching early in Term 2 as a component of the return-to-work drive enforced by the state and federal governments, endangering the health and lives of students, teachers and their families.

The state government had only briefly moved to online learning late in Term 1, during the first pandemic wave, after many parents defied the urging of Prime Minister Scott Morrison and refused to send their children to school.

Despite numerous scientific studies proving the opposite, Australian governments have insisted that children are not susceptible to the coronavirus, or that they do not transmit it to adults. In fact, 12 percent of confirmed cases in the country are children and teenagers.

The largest school cluster in the state has been at Tangara School for Girls, a private Catholic school in the western Sydney suburb of Cherrybrook. The school was closed for two weeks after a student tested positive on August 8. In total, 26 students, teachers and other close contacts were diagnosed with the coronavirus as a result of the outbreak.

Teachers and students at Tangara were subjected to a police investigation, which found that no public health orders were breached at the school.

Following reports that several Tangara students had

attended a “study-and-prayer” retreat before testing positive, NSW Premier Gladys Berejiklian seized upon the news to suggest that the outbreak was the result of a protocol breach, and not an inevitable outcome of face-to-face teaching during the pandemic.

She said: “Can I please remind everybody who manages an organisation or manages a non-government school or any other entity that large gatherings, or mixing between organisations or between schools is something which is not allowable under the COVID rules?”

Yet the NSW government allows gatherings of up to 500 for community sport—mostly involving schoolchildren—as well as crowds of up to 10,000 at major sporting events.

The Independent Educators Union (IEU), which covers teachers at non-government schools, echoed the premier’s claim that outbreaks were the result of schools failing to adhere to COVID-safe plans.

The union’s August 10 press release also stated: “Older school aged students, those in Years 11 and 12 in particular, are often working part-time jobs, doing extra-curricular activities, and are otherwise mobile in our communities in a way similar to adults.”

In other words, coronavirus outbreaks in schools are the result of the irresponsible actions of individual students, and not the reckless reopening of schools that is entirely bound up with the demands of big business for an economic “snapback.”

The restrictions that do apply to schools are minimal. Schools are encouraged to “maintain smaller classes,” but no funding has been provided to public schools to employ additional teachers.

Under the regulations, field trips are limited, choirs and wind bands are prohibited, school dances and social events are cancelled, and assemblies are restricted in size

and duration.

As was the case with the provision of online learning, the implementation of COVID-19 rules and recommendations has varied widely between schools, and sharpened the divide between wealthy private schools and the state's overcrowded and underfunded public schools.

A 2017 report by the NSW Auditor-General found that more than half of all government primary schools in Sydney were operating at or above capacity, meaning that even if sufficient teachers are found to facilitate smaller class sizes, no classrooms are available.

Speaking to the *World Socialist Web Site*, teachers reported that while some schools have implemented regular temperature screening, mandatory sanitiser stations, social distancing in corridors, and supervised hand washing for younger children, others did not even have soap in the student toilets until teachers provided it themselves.

The burden of preventing COVID-19 outbreaks has been borne almost exclusively by school staff. In addition to their existing duties, teachers have been asked to send children home if they show symptoms, to police social distancing in the classroom and playground, and to provide online learning for self-isolating students. Many have brought in their own supplies of soap, hand sanitiser and other basic hygiene items.

On May 25, the NSW Department of Education ordered all staff back to work, including those who had previously been allowed to work from home due to their age or underlying health conditions. While the updated rules do allow the possibility of working from home for teachers aged 70 and over, and those with compromised immune systems, this is at the discretion of school principals, and on the proviso that suitable work is available. If teachers in these high-risk categories are not allowed to work from home, they are offered a maximum of 20 days "special leave", after which they must return to school, or apply for annual or long-service leave.

Pregnant women and teachers who live with people at high risk for COVID-19 are explicitly excluded from these high-risk categories.

Despite the obvious danger confronting teachers and students, the unions have been virtually silent.

On March 25, two days *after* Berejiklian had caved in to public pressure and asked parents not to send their children to school, the NSW Teachers Federation (NSWTF) released a statement calling for an end to "normal school operations."

Since then, the NSWTF has not issued a single press

release in relation to the health and safety of teachers during the pandemic.

The Victorian branch of the NSWTF's parent Australian Education Union (AEU) has supported an imminent return to face-to-face teaching in that state, although there are still almost 1,500 active cases of COVID-19, and close to 400 new cases have been reported in the past week.

An IEU August 11 statement called on the government to "provide clear and decisive guidance to schools, in particular making an explicit recommendation for staff and students to wear masks within school settings."

When updated guidelines were released on August 17, containing no such recommendation, the IEU nevertheless endorsed the "Reset for Term 3" in a press release headlined "New guidelines for schools are good—compliance is crucial." The union merely instructed its members: "You don't need to ask, just wear a mask."

The statement flagged the union's commitment to returning teachers to classrooms. IEU secretary Mark Northam said: "No one knows better than our members the benefits of face-to-face learning. School employers must comply with these detailed guidelines to ensure minimal disruption to teaching and learning throughout Terms 3 and 4."

The response of the unions to the pandemic, in the face of the concerns of teachers, parents and students, demonstrates that these organisations do not represent the interests of their members. Instead, teachers, school staff and parents need to follow the lead of US educators and form rank-and-file safety committees, independent of the unions, to fight for their safety and that of students.

The Committee for Public Education (CFPE), which has fought against the reckless school reopenings and for the development of rank-and-file safety committees among teachers and educators, can be contacted here:

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