

Australian teachers confront fast-tracked return to classrooms in Victoria

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Teachers, school staff, students and parents in the Australian state of Victoria are facing a demand by the state Labor Party government, supported by the trade unions, for an accelerated return to face-to-face teaching.

Despite the global resurgence of COVID-19 due to the “return to work” drive, Premier Daniel Andrews last Sunday declared that the planned resumption of classroom learning must be fast-tracked.

This rush to lift restrictions expresses the Labor government’s further line-up behind a relentless media and corporate campaign, spearheaded by the federal Liberal-National government, for a rapid end to Victoria’s lockdown.

The governments are relying on the education trade unions to suppress the opposition of educators. On its Facebook page, the Victorian branch of the Australian Education Union (AEU), which covers school staff, has been telling its members all week: “We are continuing discussions with DET [Department of Education] around the details and will be in touch with members with more information soon.”

In other words, behind the backs of teachers, the union is working closely with the state government to carry out an orderly return to work. AEU Victorian branch president Meredith Peace told the media last Sunday that the faster return to classrooms was a positive sign that the education system was slowly returning to normal.

Megan, a primary school teacher in Melbourne, the state capital, told the WSWs: “I’ve just written my letter of resignation from the union. I don’t believe they represent us. They are doing what the government wants without question. They know what is going on, the stress and anxiety. But all they do is toe the line.

“I think this is happening internationally. I have a

friend in California. She said that teachers there are exhausted. The nature of the outbreak is that it will recur. I’m nervous about going back because I hear kids saying: ‘I’m going to my aunt’s place.’ In other words, they might spread the virus. I’m nervous for my colleagues, but I am unsurprised by the announcement. There is no consideration for educators.”

In Melbourne next week, all Year 12, and any Year 11 and 10 students studying a Year 12 subject, must attend the General Achievement Test (GAT). The GAT is a three-hour examination.

The following week, from October 12 to 16, senior secondary students (Years 11 and 12), and any Year 10 students studying a Year 11 subject, must return to the classroom. In addition, all primary school students (Prep to Grade 6) will return, with individual schools determining the exact schedule.

As yet, no plans have been announced for the return of secondary students in Years 7 to 10, but that is likely to follow soon.

All childcare centres were reopened on September 28 in order to facilitate the return to work of 127,000 workers this week.

In rural and regional areas of Victoria, all primary school students will return this week, followed by all secondary students, from years 7 to 12, next week.

At the government’s press conference last Sunday, the state Deputy Chief Health Officer Allen Cheng, revealed that 139 teachers and 373 students had so far been infected with the coronavirus in Victoria.

This is the first time that the Andrews government has released this data. It shows the risk involved in forcing teachers and students back into classrooms.

To justify the reopening of primary schools, Cheng cited a Murdoch Children’s Research Institute (MCRI) survey that purportedly showed that young children are

at a lower risk of getting and spreading infection. In its report, the MCRI cherry picked international studies of COVID transmission among children that tended to support this contention.

As many international studies, however, cast doubt on this claim. One study in the US state of Illinois found that children younger than 5 years of age have high amounts of viral load compared with older children and adults. It concluded that young children “can potentially be important drivers of Covid spread in the general population.”

Moreover, the behaviour habits of young children interacting with each other, both in day-care centres and schools, raised concerns for additional amplification of transmission.

Another study, by the Massachusetts General Hospital for Children, showed that children carry high viral loads, even with mild symptoms of the disease or no symptoms, and this viral load is independent of age.

In May, Prime Minister Scott Morrison made his now infamous claim that social distancing was neither “required” nor “appropriate” in schools. He was referring to similarly handpicked and dubious data. At that time, Andrews, responding to the demands of the corporate elite, reversed his previous decision to keep schools closed for all of Term 2, and prematurely reopened them on May 26.

This led to an eruption of outbreaks in schools, in tandem with an exponential increase in community transmission. The Labor government initially attempted to suppress this second wave of the epidemic with limited lockdown measures in order to minimise disruption to business.

On August 4, as anger grew and the situation spiralled out of control, the Andrews government declared a “state of disaster” and imposed more stringent measures, including the closure of the school system.

Once again, the Andrews government is gambling with the lives of teachers, students and the entire working class by accelerating the relaxation of restrictions while the virus still circulates within the community.

As Andrews repeatedly emphasises, his government is pursuing the bipartisan policy of suppression, not eradication of COVID-19 transmission. Outbreaks, sickness and deaths are accepted as the cost of “doing

business.”

Far from defending the health and safety of teachers, the AEU bureaucrats are loyally implementing the Andrews government demands. For example, it is reported in a Frequently Asked Questions section of the AEU website that in the event of a confirmed case of coronavirus at a school, the principal will not necessarily inform the school community. Instead, this decision will be made by the government on a “case by case basis.”

As early as late August, the AEU’s Peace declared that if the Andrews government were to reopen schools, the AEU would support a staggered return, because that had been “effective” the previous time.

Effective for whom? Certainly not for teachers and students, who suffered infections, more than 150 school closures and the constant fear of entering workplaces with grossly inadequate safety measures in place, and where social distancing is impossible.

Across the globe, the forced reopening of schools and the economy has had terrible consequences, with more than a million deaths.

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. Teachers, school staff and parents need to follow the lead of US and European educators and form rank-and-file safety committees, totally independent of the unions, to fight for their safety and the safety of students.

The Committee for Public Education (CFPE) is calling for the establishment of such committees in all schools. We urge teachers, school staff, parents and students to contact the CFPE to discuss the necessary action to protect the lives and safety of students and school communities.

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