

Australia: Widening teacher-student opposition to Sydney school reopening plan amid COVID crisis

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Anger and opposition is escalating among teachers, school staff, students, and families over the New South Wales (NSW) state Liberal-National government's plan to reopen Sydney's schools on August 16 for up to 70,000 senior Year 12 students. Coming amid a still-worsening COVID-19 Delta variant epidemic in the city, the schools' reopening proposal flies in the face of all epidemiological science and, if implemented, is guaranteed to result in deaths and serious injuries.

Faced with predictions by epidemiologists that Greater Sydney's limited lockdown measures are almost certainly going to need to be extended beyond August, the government has feigned concern for the plight of Year 12 Higher School Certificate (HSC) students. The official rationale for sending them back to school is to support their preparation for final year examinations.

NSW Education Minister, Sarah Mitchell declared, "Nothing is more important than education, and our HSC students in particular need certainty."

This is a contemptible fraud. The very politicians who are shedding crocodile tears over students have starved public schools of funding for decades and created one of the most unequal education systems in advanced capitalist countries.

The real agenda is to use Year 12 students and their teachers as the spearheads of the government's drive to force all students back to face-to-face learning. This is being taken forward on behalf of big business and finance capital to ensure that children's parents are able to attend their workplaces. The reopening of the schools is a prelude to the wider elimination of all restrictions on business activity and the resumption of regular workplace practices, regardless of the dangers to the working class.

The Liberal-National government of Premier Gladys Berejiklian is pursuing a murderous "herd immunity"

policy, refusing to implement stricter lockdown measures as coronavirus case numbers escalate daily.

The entire political establishment is in lockstep. The Labor Party nationally is in de facto coalition with the federal government of Prime Minister Scott Morrison through the national cabinet. In NSW, the Labor opposition has extended bipartisan support to virtually every initiative of the Berejiklian government—including its school reopening plan. State Labor leader Chris Minns has merely encouraged the government to do more to allow teachers to be vaccinated.

Medical experts have meanwhile condemned the school reopening plan. "Sydney is in an unprecedented crisis," Australian Medical Association (AMA) President Dr. Omar Khorshid explained. "There is no need for the additional risk of bringing Year 12 back to school, bringing teachers back to school, putting those teachers at risk, putting the families of those teachers, the other staff, the cleaners, the people in the canteens, and of course, the families of Year 12 students themselves. Putting all those people at risk just for this purpose seems nonsensical to the AMA."

The government is reallocating 40,000 doses of Pfizer vaccines from regional NSW to newly eligible Year 12 students in Sydney. This measure has only compounded the vaccine rollout debacle. Many people, including teachers and school staff, have over the weekend had their vaccination bookings cancelled because of supply shortages.

Teachers under the age of 40, nearly half the entire workforce, are ineligible for the Pfizer vaccines and have received conflicting public advice over the safety of the AstraZeneca vaccine for their age category.

Students and school staff who are able to access a vaccine between now and the August 16 reopening date

will not be protected from COVID-19. A recent study from Scotland reported that effective vaccine protection from the Pfizer vaccine following the first shot is only 12 percent for the first four weeks. It takes weeks after a second dose of vaccine for full antibodies to develop.

Other health risks have also been disregarded. Educators have raised concerns about those students who refuse to get vaccinated. There is also the impossibility of social distancing in classrooms of up to thirty or more students. Movements of students across the city is a further risk of spreading the virus, with one school revealing it has students from 160 different postcodes.

The government's mantra that "schools are safe" has been repeatedly exposed as a lie. Amid the dangerous pandemic, any indoor venue with significant concentrations of people is a potential vector, as numerous experiences with school infections internationally and in Australia demonstrates.

Likewise false is any suggestion that children and young adults are not at risk from the virus. This is being tragically proven internationally with escalating child infections, hospitalisations and deaths. Shockingly, in the week of July 12 alone, 150 children in Indonesia died with half of them under the age of five.

Over the past fortnight, 200 children aged nine or under have tested positive in Sydney, and almost 25 percent of cases have been aged 19 or younger. Two teenagers with the virus have been hospitalised in Intensive Care Units.

Thousands of students in Sydney have taken to social media to express their opposition to the state government.

Eight separate petitions have demanded the government either cancel or find alternatives to this year's HSC and trial exams. One student wrote, "My voice is drowned by political platitudes. Am I putting my family at risk by going to school? How are my friends in the Blacktown Local Government Area going to have equal access to their education? How is my teacher going to be safe at school when she isn't eligible for Pfizer, yet has been advised against AstraZeneca by her GP? How is it safe when students have the option to come to school unvaccinated?"

Among teachers and school workers there is growing fury—directed not just against the state government but also the NSW Teachers Federation (NSWTF).

The union responded to the school reopening plan with a statement describing the move as "premature." NSWTF President Angelo Gavrielatos added that, "This does not fill teachers with confidence."

Flagging their intention to collaborate with the

government's criminal policy, Gavrielatos and the union bureaucracy explained that, "Further assessment of the evolving health crisis will inform the response of the union in the days and weeks ahead."

Ordinary teachers responded angrily. There are hundreds of sharp comments on the NSWTF Facebook page. In response to the union statement, one wrote: "So what is the NSWTF doing about it? [...] Bring forward the industrial action. OR are you in the pockets of our premier?"

Another teacher outlined: "Working conditions were a joke as it is and then the government once again demonstrates what little regard it has for our profession. It seems we are disposable. Talking and stamping our feet is getting us nowhere. Why isn't the Federation taking stronger action? What are we paying you for?"

Another explained: "NSWTF if there is no immediate action I have ZERO confidence in my union. No faith whatsoever. I might as well donate my fees to Vinnies [charity], at least I will know it will be used for a good cause immediately."

Teachers, school staff, and students urgently need to take matters into their own hands. There can be no return to face-to-face teaching while community transmission of the COVID-19 virus continues! The widest discussion needs to be developed on the necessary initiatives, including industrial action, to prevent the scheduled August 16 school reopening. From the beginning of the pandemic, the Committee for Public Education has led the fight for the formation of rank-and-file safety committees in every school, independent of the unions.

This now takes on a life and death urgency and we urge educators, students, and working people in Sydney to contact us and discuss how the struggle is to be taken forward.

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