

Australia: Student opposition develops against return to face-to-face classes

John Harris**10 August 2021**

Growing concern and anger among students, alongside teachers, school staff and families, last week forced the New South Wales (NSW) state government to temporarily delay plans to reopen schools for all Year 12 students in Sydney, Australia's largest city.

But the Liberal-National government remains intent on pushing ahead with the return to face-to-face classes, originally scheduled for August 16, despite the COVID-19 Delta strain continuing to spread across the partially-locked down city and beyond into regional areas of the state.

As has been happening around the world, the government is acting on behalf of the corporate elite in insisting that schools must reopen, regardless of the risk to young lives and health, so that all workplaces fully resume. The state's Year 12 students are being placed on the frontline of a wider push back to classrooms. The calculation in ruling circles is that if children are not at school, their parents have to stay home to watch them and are unable to work and produce profits for the employers.

But this is triggering mounting opposition. Thousands of students, teachers and other people have signed petitions denouncing the government's plans. As of Tuesday, more than 2,400 people had signed a student-led petition "Against returning Year 12 students to school during the Covid outbreak."

The petition states: "This reckless plan seriously risks the health of our staff, our communities, and of high school students everywhere. We cannot sit back and watch as the education system prioritises our grades and our output over our wellbeing... the majority of staff and students will be sent back to school insufficiently vaccinated..."

"[T]he NSW government is not only endangering us, but our families too, as many of us have grandparents, younger siblings, and immuno-compromised family members living at home. What's more, if teachers become infected, our learning will be compromised even further. They do not deserve to be called upon to risk their wellbeing during this crisis."

The students demand that: "No student or staff in greater

Sydney be returned to school until this outbreak is brought under control. Replace year 12 exams with an assessment framework that does not require students to risk their health, the health of their families and teachers."

Significantly, the petition also demands that working class students be provided with the necessary resources to learn online. It demands that the assessment "takes into account socio-economic differences created by an online learning environment. Support students from low socio-economic backgrounds with a free laptop and internet dongles—too many still have slow, intermittent internet access and are sharing equipment."

On July 28 when Premier Gladys Berejiklian announced the return of Year 12 students to classrooms, 177 new locally acquired infections were reported in Sydney on the same day, bringing the state's total to 2,574 since 16 June. Since then the pandemic has further spiralled out of control, rising above 300 confirmed cases daily, and by yesterday the statewide total had more than doubled to 5,805.

Such is the government's frenzy to reopen schools, that it is still urging all 24,000 Year 12 students in the worst-infected local government areas in western and southwestern Sydney to participate in a vaccination operation this week at the city's Olympic Park. But it had to scrap a plan to bus students to the site after staff members refused to participate in the obviously dangerous exercise.

The government has been forced to dump its plan to force all Year 12 students to sit Higher School Certificate (HSC) trial exams in person next month, with the trials now to be held online. Despite the student petition, however, it is still insisting that all the state's 76,310 HSC students must sit the final exams in person in October.

Figures from NSW Health last week underscored the growing dangers to young people. Of the 2,397 confirmed cases acquired locally from June 16 to July 26, 15 percent, or 360 victims, were aged 10-19, despite those in that age bracket making up only 11.9 percent of the state's population. A further 223 children aged under 10 were infected during the same period, equal to 9 percent of cases.

That means that a quarter of all cases were aged under 19.

Education Minister Sarah Mitchell feigned concern for students, saying “education is essential and we must provide our HSC students the opportunity to receive the curriculum and wellbeing support they need.” This is a fraud. The same governments that are shedding crocodile tears over the welfare and scholarship of students are responsible for gutting public-school funding for decades.

In reality, the reopening of schools is a spearhead of the drive by big business to end all lockdowns and other safety restrictions that impinge on its profits. As the petition notes, the virus has been allowed to spread because the state government has refused to implement adequate lockdown measures, and the federal government has failed to provide sufficient vaccines.

“Our state government’s unwillingness to implement an effective quick lockdown, made even worse by the federal government’s botched vaccine rollout, put us here in the first place,” the petition states. “We must not pay the price for the government’s failures.”

Hundreds of people have commented in support. One declared: “Schools should not be treated as the guinea pigs for the NSW govt’s plans to open up and let the virus rip!” Another said: “The Govt says workplaces are where the virus is spreading. Schools are workplaces! Why should teachers and students be made to take risks in a dangerous situation wholly caused by State & Federal Govt failures?”

A high school teacher remarked: “Amazing initiative... I am fuming at the blatant disregard of teachers and their families who have been completely overlooked and disregarded throughout this pandemic. Year 12 students are taught by a dedicated staff who deserve to be protected as well.”

One student said: “This decision by the government is utterly stupid and flies in the face of the health advice we are all being mandated to follow. Going to school, getting infected, and developing long-covid is going to f*** up people’s ATARs [HSC marks] and 2022 plans much more than a few months of online learning will... Please, boycott this dangerous plan, and refuse to attend school.”

Other petitions are demanding the government cancel or find alternatives to this year’s HSC and trial exams. One petition, “Cancel the HSC for NSW 2021—Find Better Alternatives,” has received over 3,300 signatures. The petition, “Replace 2021 HSC/Trial exams with assignments” has gotten over 4,350 signatures. “An Open Letter to All Those Involved Regarding the New South Wales HSC Students of 2021” has received nearly 1,400 signatures.

By contrast, the Labor Party has raised no opposition to the government’s plans. It has provided the Liberal-National Coalition with bipartisan support throughout the pandemic,

as it has at the federal level for Prime Minister Scott Morrison’s government.

If the government has been able to press for the reopening of schools, it is only because it can count on the assistance of the trade unions, which have sought to isolate and suppress teachers’ and students’ struggles at every turn.

Despite the worsening Delta outbreak, teachers unions from both the private and public school sectors have implored the NSW government to consult with them to develop a “road map” for the return to face-to-face classes from August 28.

This is a warning that the unions are continuing to collaborate with the government in pushing to reopen schools, as they have been doing for weeks. NSW Teachers Federation president Angelo Gavrielatos welcomed the government’s temporary delay, saying “sanity had prevailed.”

To halt the ruling class’s return-to-school offensive, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) and the Committee for Public Education (CFPE) are urging students, teachers, school staff and parents to form rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions, to organise a unified fight against it, and protect the health and lives of students and staff.

This has to be part of a broader global struggle by the working class as a whole against the capitalist system, which is demanding the ever-greater sacrifice of public health, lives and livelihoods for private profit and wealth accumulation.

These perspective will be discussed at an IYSSE online public meeting entitled “The crisis of capitalism and the resurgence of the working class” this Saturday at 4pm (AEST). We urge all students, young people and workers to register for the meeting, and take part in the discussion. Register here:

https://zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_JbDuogKvSMSQhJrbx7V9dg



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