

Oppose the school reopening drive in Australia amid COVID-Delta pandemic! Form rank-and-file safety committees and prepare strike action!

Committee for Public Education (Australia)

20 August 2021

In Australia, as internationally, school teachers and students are on the front lines of a highly dangerous ruling class campaign to eliminate COVID-19 restrictions and “open up” economic activity, for the benefit of big business and finance capital.

The Committee for Public Education (CPFE) calls on all teachers, school workers, students, and working families to mobilise against the school reopening drive in Sydney, and other parts of Australia, experiencing dangerous waves of Delta-variant COVID-19. The lives and well-being of educators and students must not be sacrificed upon the high altar of corporate profit!

Rank-and-file safety committees need to be formed in every school, to organise the widest discussion on the necessary steps going forward, including the preparation of strike action, to prevent a return to classroom learning in unsafe conditions. The CPFE is holding an online meeting on Sunday, August 22, 1 p.m. (AEST) to discuss these vital issues. Please register here and promote the event among educators, students, colleagues and friends!

Enormous anger and opposition within the working class immediately emerged in opposition to the initial moves to wind down online remote learning.

In New South Wales (NSW), the epicentre of the COVID-19 Delta-variant upsurge, the state Liberal-National state government was forced to back down from its plan, announced last month, to dragoon all Year 12 students and their teachers back into the schools.

The temporary retreat came after an outpouring of opposition. Several student-initiated online petitions were signed by thousands. One declared: “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. [...] 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. We must not pay the price for the government’s failures.”

Among teachers, anger was directed at the NSW Teachers Federation as well as at the government. “Working conditions were a joke as it is, and then the government once again demonstrates what little regard it has for our profession,” one teacher wrote on the union’s Facebook page. “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?”

Around the globe, the teacher unions have played the driving role in campaigns for schools’ reopening. In the United States, for example, Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers

(salary \$560,000 per year) declared this month that the “number one priority” was not teacher and student safety, but rather “to get kids to be back in school.”

In Australia, the teacher unions, including the NSW Teachers Federation and the Australian Education Union, have blocked any independent action by teachers and school workers to protect themselves and their students. The NSWTF and AEU have functioned as mouthpieces of federal and state governments, and their health departments, insisting that educators could not challenge any of the official guidelines, even when they involved working onsite amid community transmission of COVID-19.

With rank-and-file safety committees, the widest discussion needs to be developed and defence actions prepared, including strike action.

Significant numbers of teachers and students are already being put at risk. The NSW government’s partial retreat on a full reopening of the schools, for Year 12 students and teachers, has been replaced with deliberately confusing and complicated local area guidelines. Schools in Sydney that are not part of the 12 worst affected local government areas, and those in regional NSW, currently allow Year 12 students access to their schools for up to two hours a day, four days a week.

This provision, according to New South Wales education minister Sarah Mitchell, is to accommodate “students who, for one reason or another, might be struggling with a particularly important learning concept from home,” and for those who “need some mental health or wellbeing support, or reassurance from a teacher or an educator that they trust.”

What a fraud! Regarding “important learning concepts”—these can easily be postponed for teaching and learning, in conditions other than a mass pandemic with limited vaccinations. There is no reason why the high stakes Higher School Certificate (HSC) exams cannot be cancelled, and school-based assessments and other criteria used to process university applications for 2022. As far as “mental health or wellbeing support” go, federal and state governments have demonstrated their utter indifference to these considerations. For years, public schools have had to manage, with grossly inadequate funding, for mental health and wellbeing services.

There is little doubt that some schools, especially elite private institutions, whose prestige is tied to HSC exam scores, will use the two-hour face to face teaching blocs for intensive drilling sessions.

These arrangements underscore that the government’s backdown, on a full resumption of Year 12 face-to-face teaching, represents only a temporary retreat. The two hours a day allotment is the thin end of the wedge, with the government seeking to accustom people to conducting classroom activities during the pandemic surge, paving the way for a wider reopening, as people are forced to “live with the virus.” Meanwhile, in very real danger are the thousands of teachers and students travelling

extensive distances, often on public transport, across Sydney, to reach their classrooms for two-hour learning sessions.

Previous government claims that coronavirus poses minimal risk to children and young adults have been repeatedly disproved. The Delta variant is especially threatening.

In the latest NSW outbreak, between 25-30 percent of all infections have affected people aged 0-19. Children and teenagers have been hospitalised including in ICU and a 15-year-old school-aged boy has died from COVID-19. In neighbouring Victoria, the proportion is even higher, with 45 percent of all active COVID-19 cases being children and teenagers. Schools have served as vectors—in the latest infection upsurge at least 65 schools, as well as 150 childcare centres, have had to be closed due to student or staff infections. Hospitalisations are increasing, in line with international experiences in Europe, North America, and elsewhere. The inevitable outcome of the schools' reopening drive will be significant levels of death and injury, including complex physiological and neurological effects from "long COVID."

The vaccine rollout debacle represents another indictment of the Australian ruling class. Vaccination rates are near the bottom of all advanced economies. Shortages have been managed with a view, not towards protecting the most vulnerable, but rather towards reopening the economy as quickly as possible. This is why vaccines were removed from regional NSW—triggering numerous cancellations of vaccination bookings, including for teachers and school workers—and redirected to Year 12 students in Sydney. The vaccination crisis has been sharply exposed by the COVID-19 outbreak in Aboriginal communities in western NSW, with dozens of children among the infected.

The pandemic has exposed the class divide that wracks the Australian education system. The country's schools are among the most unequal in the world. Successive Labor and Liberal governments have funnelled vast public funds into private schools, including the most elite, that are impossible to access for the vast majority of the population. Even within the public education system, a divide has been engineered between selective and "high performing" schools, usually within the affluent inner suburbs, and outer suburban and regional working-class schools. Less affluent schools, with disadvantaged students, have been starved of the necessary resources to deal with the complex educational and psychological needs of their students, and many are wracked by staffing shortages and related crises.

Across Sydney and NSW, teachers were, for months, denied priority status for vaccination. This week, teachers in the worst affected areas became eligible, though many are being asked to work on site, despite an at least two month delay before two vaccine doses take proper effect. Access remains difficult—though several private schools in Sydney have organised school-based vaccinations, for their staff and students, circumventing the vaccination hub queues.

Rank-and-file safety committees must be built in every school across the country. They must be joined with similar committees that are being developed in schools and workplaces around the world, through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).

The Committee for Public Education proposes the following measures:

- No return to school in any area where there is COVID-19 community transmission! The only children who ought to be on site are those of emergency workers, who do not have other family to care for them, and this must be organised with the strictest safety precautions.

- Cancel all end-of-year exams for senior students! No student or exam supervisor ought to have their lives threatened by entirely avoidable face-to-face assessments. University and other post-school applications can be equitably processed on the basis of teacher judgment and online classroom assessment.

- Close nonessential workplaces, providing full financial and social

support for parents who must stay home with their children until the pandemic is contained.

- Full funding and resources for high-quality remote learning, including high-speed broadband access for all, and expert technical support to train and assist educators.

- Proper personal protective equipment and other necessary supplies for all school staff. Nurses and medical professionals must be allocated to every school, with vaccinations made available to every student, school worker, and nearby residents. Thousands more cleaners, provided with proper cleaning equipment, should be employed to stop the spread of the virus and to overcome decades of neglect in public schools. Publicly-funded psychologists must be made available to students who are at risk from the disruption and potential trauma of their interrupted education.

- No teacher should be victimised for calling attention to unsafe conditions! Teachers' voices must be heard and acted on to protect safety and lives. All gag measures, such as public service codes of conduct, which restrict teachers from speaking publicly about what is happening in the schools, must be eliminated. Ongoing and accessible information must be provided of COVID-19 outbreaks at schools.

- Workloads must be reduced, including through lowered face-to-face teaching hours. Teachers should not be expected to do both online learning and in-class teaching, adding to an already unbearable workload. Those continuing online learning must be provided with extra time and professional development, and technical assistance to develop online skills. The employment of extra staff necessary to conduct such teaching as permanents and on full salary.

The sweeping measures necessary will require billions of dollars to sustain. Any claim there is "no money" is a self-interested lie, promoted by a wealthy corporate aristocracy and the Labor and Coalition governments that serve it. The vast sums that have been transferred to the financial elite since the pandemic began must be redirected to public education, healthcare and to meeting the social needs of ordinary people.

These demands, crucial to ensuring the safety of educators and of all workers, can only be realised through a political struggle against state and federal governments, and the capitalist profit system they defend. The experiences of the past months have demonstrated that the basic social rights of workers are incompatible with a society subordinated to the dictates of big business.

The CFPE calls for the widest discussion among educators on the necessity for a socialist program, which would involve the establishment of a workers' government, the transformation of the banks and largest corporations into publicly-owned utilities under the democratic control of the working class and free, high-quality education for all, from kindergarten to the tertiary level.

We encourage all educators, students, and working people to attend our public meeting that will be discussing these issues, and hearing reports from the United States and Sri Lanka, on the situation in schools internationally.

Register in advance and promote the meeting among educators, students, colleagues and friends!

Details: Sunday, August 22, 1 p.m. (AEST), register here.

The CFPE urges all educators and students to contact us to discuss taking forward the fight for safe working conditions.

Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com

Facebook: www.facebook.com/commforpubliceducation

Twitter: @CFPE_Australia



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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