

Australia: Interview with Year 12 student who called for final exams to be cancelled amid pandemic

Our reporters

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Reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) recently spoke to Melika Azimi, a high school student in the western Sydney suburb of Parramatta, who initiated an online petition titled “Cancel the HSC 2021, Find Better Alternatives” last July. The petition has been widely circulated by students online and has received over 7,700 signatures.

It is one of a number of student initiatives opposing the government drive to reopen the schools and force Year 12 students to sit their Higher School Certificate (HSC) final exams, amid the largest COVID outbreak in Australia since the pandemic began.

Another petition, “Replace 2021 HSC/Trial exams with assignments,” has been signed by over 4,500 students, while, “An Open Letter to All Those Involved Regarding the New South Wales HSC Students of 2021” has been endorsed by 1,400. “Against returning Year 12 students to school during the Covid outbreak” has over 2600 signatories.

State and federal governments are declaring that lockdowns will be ended in October, as more than a thousand infections are recorded in New South Wales (NSW) each day and cases in Victoria near that number. The hospitals in both states are already overwhelmed. Governments are declaring that the population must accept mass illness and death, so that full corporate profit-making activities can resume.

School reopenings are a central component of this agenda, aimed at forcing parents back to their workplaces.

In NSW, the Liberal-National state government has announced Year 12 students, along with kindergarten and Year 1 students will return to the classrooms en masse from October 25. The following Monday, Year 2, 6 and 11 students are set to resume face-to-face learning. All other cohorts will return on November 8, and HSC exams will begin the following day. The Victorian Labor government is similarly preparing a reopening of the schools from October.

Roughly a third of all infections in NSW have been among children and teenagers, while hundreds more have been stricken with the illness in Victoria. During the limited lockdowns, the schools in both states have remained open for the children of essential workers. Despite vastly reduced student numbers, over 200 schools have been closed in Sydney after COVID exposures, along with more than 75 in Victoria.

WSWS: What compelled you to begin this petition? Can you speak on the response that you have gotten?

Melika Azimi: I started the petition because myself and my peers thought it was ridiculous that we are expected to be sitting the HSC under these circumstances. With COVID, distance education learning, learning from home, the circumstances are not conducive to be learning in. It's really difficult for a lot of people to be able to engage with the learning when stuck at home.

Despite this, we are expected to be sitting the HSC, even though all the exams in the past couple of months during lockdown have been online.

We aren't prepared to be doing it in person.

The petition really was about how unfair it is and how there needs to be changes to the way that we are being assessed and changes to the way that we are learning. It's unfair for us and there could easily be other alternatives to make up for that. It just doesn't accurately reflect academic intelligence.

WSWS: What were some of the sentiments among your friends, peers and teachers?

MA: I've gotten a lot of support from teachers. From students it has been a little bit of a mix. Surprisingly there has been a lot of opposition against what I'm doing. A lot of them [students], for some reason, are not happy about it. They would rather be sitting the HSC. They have this idea that when we say alternatives, it is to scrap the whole thing, which will make it impossible for them to get into university. Whereas we are advocating for alternatives that are fair and just for everybody. So there has been some miscommunication and misunderstanding among a lot of Year 12 students about what we are fighting for and what we are trying to do.

But we have also received a lot of support from the people who understand what it is about. In regard to the teachers, they definitely agree that there needs to be an alternative. A lot of teachers have contacted me, supporting what I am doing and saying they believe that it is the right thing to do. Being teachers, people should listen to them more, people need to give them more credit. They would know what is best.

One teacher said: “Thank you from the bottom of my heart. I am a teacher, not a student, but this petition resonates with me. I've been teaching for 40 years. One thing that I find most heartening is the number of universities who have been following their perspective and looking at a whole individual rather than the HSC ATAR. The dialogue on conditions about COVID safety and looking after mental health are undermined when the government is putting in place conditions that can only undermine mental health even further. Thank you for reaching out and speaking on it.”

There are a few emails like this.

WSWS: What about support from students?

MA: A lot of people are feeling very stressed and overwhelmed about all of this. They definitely feel like they are not prepared, and the government really is not listening to them and not taking their feelings into account because they have this agenda that they are putting forth. And they are acting on that agenda.

Being ill-equipped, forced to do online learning from home. Different people have different circumstances. One student can be in an environment that is more suitable than the other. Some students live in households that are more supportive than others and others live in homes that are broken. It's unfair, it is unequal, everybody is getting a different

experience out of this.

WSWS: There are certainly issues of inequality, some students don't have the material that they need.

MA: I'm not from a regional area. Although their situation isn't necessarily as bad as ours, they still have major issues, like not having access to teachers, lack of resources, etc.

WSWS: You mentioned the impact on students' mental health. What kind of support are they being provided with? Are additional counsellors or psychologists being brought on?

MA: We have had workshops, independent companies that come in to talk about mental health. These workshops have come into our schools so many times, like R U OK, Headspace, all these types of things. It can work for some, although it doesn't really do much, to be honest.

Counselling has been provided, that is only the official support that has been given to us. I don't think that they have added any extra counsellors or psychologists or anything like that for the schools. It's the same staff that they had on board before this all happened.

It's the exact same for teachers, no extra support has been given to them or extra staff hired. Teachers are under a lot of pressure. My teachers are telling me that they are working extra overtime now but still haven't received that additional support.

WSWS: Your petition refers to the establishment of alternatives. Do you have a set proposal? Also, what has been done with the petition?

MA: In terms of the alternatives, initially we proposed that we could have a different type of criteria for students to get into university, an independent criteria and application process for the different courses that they are offering. A lot of students were upset about that, they felt like their hard work was being scrapped, so there needs to be some system where students still get the marks that they received before the lockdown period.

We did send it to [NSW Premier] Gladys Berejiklian and [Education Minister] Sarah Mitchell. We got no response. We know that they saw it and watched the story. Through our Instagram account, we have a screenshot which shows that the education minister had watched one of the stories on that account. She is aware of the petition. We have tried to email her and contact them but they haven't responded.

WSWS: What do you think about the government's response to the pandemic and the current outbreak?

MA: I'm definitely thinking that more should be done. We're in the middle of a pandemic but they are adamant about us sitting the HSC. There is no logical reason for that. An alternative can easily be established, which benefits students and ensures that health and safety is prioritised.

WSWS: Why do you think they have responded in this way?

MA: For the money I assume. If they have an agenda, then it doesn't support their agenda to put in place an alternative. A lot of planning and preparation has been carried out, so many things have already been done to reopen schools, too late to go back on what they say.

WSWS: Do you have anything to say about claims by government figures that COVID-19 does not seriously affect young people?

MA: Have they said that?

WSWS: Trump and Biden, Boris Johnson, they have all downplayed the dangers. State and federal leaders here have claimed that children and teenagers don't transmit the virus much, even though that has been proven to be false.

MA: To be honest, I don't really know what to say to that. I don't know what the health side of it is. If it isn't true that children aren't as badly impacted by the pandemic, then that is ridiculous. Childcare has been open. It makes the whole lockdown seem somewhat pointless if the children can pass it on to teachers, supervisors and families.

WSWS: Not only can they spread it, most children and young people are unvaccinated and will be when the schools are reopened. In the UK they

have called it the pandemic of the young. This isn't widely publicised. In the US students and young people are becoming seriously ill and some are dying from COVID after being forced back to school. Even if they recover from the infection, there are long-term health effects that are not often spoken about.

These can include extreme fatigue, heart problems and serious cognitive impairment in children, in some cases the equivalent of having a stroke or lead poisoning. There was one example, a kid who was one of the brightest in his class before he had COVID. He was asked in a test to draw a hand on a clock, he couldn't do it, he didn't even realise what was happening.

MA: If that's the case, that's even more of a reason that we shouldn't be sent back to school. If there was a seed of doubt about the potentially bad health risks, I don't think it is fair to be sending us back to school. It is risking our lives and risking our health despite this evidence.

WSWS: You previously mentioned there were negative comments from students and youth about the petition. What are people saying in opposition to it?

MA: Some people are saying that it is a stupid idea, the government won't listen to it, they don't think they will be able cancel the HSC. They just think that this whole thing is unnecessary. I guess people are just jumping on to the bandwagon, without really understanding what it will be about.

WSWS: Appeals to governments are not going to be answered, because they serve different class interests. We are raising the need for a movement of students and teachers against the reopening. The petitions earlier in the pandemic, opposing the school reopening plans, had a substantial impact in galvanising these sentiments.

MA: Honestly, if students and teachers were to strike, it would be really effective. I doubt that people will be willing to do it. Although that will really work to oppose the government and go against its agenda. It's kind of risky though.

I feel like it would have to be the teachers. Teachers would have to be the ones that start all of this. From what I understand, a lot of students would be unwilling to strike because of fear of parents, fear of what is going to happen and there isn't really any consensus on whether or not this should be done. If teachers did strike, it would also encourage the students to strike.



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