

# Oppose the dangerous reopening of schools in Australia! Form rank-and-file action safety committees!

The Committee for Public Education (CFPE)  
5 October 2021

The Committee for Public Education condemns this month's dangerous reopening of schools in Melbourne and Sydney amid widespread COVID-19 community transmission. We urge teachers, school workers, students and working families to form and join rank-and-file action safety committees fighting for a scientifically-based eradication program to defend the lives of staff and students, including the right to fully-resourced online learning.

There is no scientific basis whatsoever for the rushed return to face-to-face teaching mandated in Victoria by the state Labor Party government and in New South Wales (NSW) by its Liberal-National counterpart. Epidemiological knowledge as well as bitter international experience leaves no doubt that if the school reopening drive goes unchallenged, the result will be entirely preventable serious illnesses and deaths of children and their educators.

This has been seen already in countries such as Britain and the United States, where schools have been forced open. Like its international counterparts, the ruling elite in Australia is being driven not by medical science but by a class agenda. Schools must be open and children brought back into classrooms in order for their parents to be herded into their workplaces. This is the keystone of the economic "reopening," with corporations given free rein to maximise profits without regard for health and safety.

Even in the previous conditions of lockdown and remote learning, schools have been widely affected by coronavirus infections. Despite being available only for children of essential workers, and staffed on site by small numbers of teachers and administrators, 200 schools have had to close in Sydney and over 100 in Melbourne due to outbreaks. In response, authorities are changing the infection response guidelines, with new cases to see only specific classrooms asked to isolate, instead of whole schools.

Federal and state governments, Labor and Liberal-National alike, are seeking to condition the population to endemic COVID-19 infection. Not only has a scientifically-based strategy of eradicating the virus been dismissed, but many basic mitigation measures are being junked as part of the new "let it rip" agenda.

## **Face-to-face teaching imposed amid soaring infections**

The Victorian Labor government's plan reflects the reckless and criminal character of the "national plan" for reopening. Melbourne has been in lockdown for nearly 250 days since the beginning of the pandemic. In-person teaching has been suspended for most of this period, with teachers and school staff working diligently to ensure children continued to learn while staying safe in their homes. Now, however, Premier Daniel Andrews is reopening the schools just as the state's daily infection rate approaches 2,000, the highest level since the beginning of the pandemic. This infection tally has doubled in the past eight days.

More than 50,000 Year 12 students and their teachers have been forced

back into the schools in Victoria this week. They will be followed by other year levels on a staggered basis between October 18 and November 5. In NSW, classrooms return between October 18 and November 1, though significant numbers of students are already returning to schools.

The Year 12s in Victoria were rushed back in order to do the General Achievement Test (GAT), part of final year assessments that determine post-secondary course qualification. In the weekend before the GAT, about 8,000 students were tested and 33 were positive. How many positive cases were missed among the untested student cohort remains unknown. The entirely unnecessary face-to-face administration of the test represented a potential super-spreading event. Today it was reported that four Year 12 students have tested positive after sitting the test.

Mandated so-called COVID-safe measures in all the states and territories are manifestly inadequate. Their primary purpose is to create the illusion of safety for the premature school reopening that is inherently unsafe.

Insufficient time has been allowed for school staff and students aged 12 and over to be fully vaccinated. Younger children remain unable to be vaccinated, with international safety trials still being finalised. The vaccine mandate for school staff in Victoria requires two doses of vaccine only by November 29, nearly two months after the reopening drive has begun. Students are not required to be vaccinated. Mask-wearing is only required for secondary, not primary, students. With children unvaccinated in primary schools, not wearing masks in often large class sizes, with no social distancing, classroom infections are expected to surge.

Similarly inadequate preparations are being made to improve ventilation in classrooms. In many older public schools, windows can only be partially opened and sometimes not at all. Where windows can be opened, the approach of summer will make classrooms unbearable on hot days. There is a large shortfall of air purification devices. The Victorian government has purchased 51,000 of these for public and low-fee private schools. With not enough for every classroom, the reported plan is to use the air purifiers in only areas deemed the highest risk, such as staffrooms, sick bays and music rooms. In NSW, the government has ordered only 10,000 purifiers.

Australia's media and political establishment now insists that children and young people are not at significant risk from COVID-19. This is a blatant lie—belied both by scientific research into the effects of the Delta variant of the coronavirus and by tragic experience around the world.

## **Tragic international experience**

In Britain, the first two weeks of the schools reopening saw 59,000 children infected with COVID-19. In the United States, more than 200,000 children have been infected every week for five weeks, mostly the consequence of the return to face-to-face teaching. Behind these and similar statistics internationally lie countless preventable tragedies. In

light of the media blackout in Australia, it is worth highlighting even a small number of cases:

- In England on September 28, 15-year-old Jorja Halliday died of COVID-19, on the same day that she was booked to be vaccinated. A preliminary investigation indicated that she had myocarditis, which inflames the heart muscle and triggers chest pain and shortness of breath.

- Earlier this year in the US, 10-year-old Dae'Shun Jamison died after contracting the coronavirus and Multisystem Inflammatory Syndrome in Children (MIS-C), a highly dangerous condition triggered in certain cases by COVID-19. He died after enduring a series of desperate medical interventions, including the amputation of his hands and legs. Three children are now dying of COVID in the US every day, alongside three educators.

- Separate scientific studies published earlier this year from Israel and Britain indicated that as much as 10-15 percent of children who contract coronavirus develop “long COVID” symptoms, including serious respiratory issues, chronic fatigue and pain, and cognitive issues such as “brain fog.” One affected student, previously high-achieving 15-year-old Will Grogan, told the *New York Times* in August that science and maths work he mastered one day became incomprehensible to him the next, while he unknowingly inserted French vocabulary in his English assessments.

How many deaths and serious illnesses in children have authorities in Australia calculated as the acceptable price to be paid for the reopening? Such macabre forecasts have undoubtedly been developed behind closed doors, yet no genuine public debate has been permitted on the potential implications of the school system's reopening.

The worst-affected schools will be those in working-class areas. This is for two reasons: firstly, these areas have much higher rates of coronavirus infection, with low-paid and insecure workers who cannot work from home exposed to the virus in their workplaces, and secondly, the dilapidated and overcrowded nature of many public schools, which lack the facilities, support staff and infrastructure of the wealthiest private institutions.

#### **Teacher unions complicit**

A critical role is being played by the teacher unions. Throughout the pandemic, the Australian Education Union and NSW Teachers Federation (NSWTF) have functioned as the accomplices of state and federal governments, echoing every official pronouncement on the status of the schools while undermining every effort of teachers and school workers to defend their safety and that of their students in the face of efforts to keep classrooms open.

The unions are now complicit with the reopening of the schools. In a September 30 statement, NSWTF President Angelo Gavrielatos characterised the government's plan as “necessary, but not without its challenges.”

The AEU in Victoria has not issued a statement directly addressing the return to in-person teaching. Its lockstep support for the government was indicated in a September 22 press release enthusiastically welcoming the announcement of the inadequate number of air purifiers to be provided to schools.

The union's contempt for the safety and wellbeing of ordinary teachers has been expressed in social media replies to school workers' concerns, insisting that COVID-19 issues should be addressed through individual school's union sub-branches and health and safety representatives. In other words, it is up to teachers in each school to fend for themselves, with the AEU washing its hands of any responsibility for the casualties that are to come.

This approach has been accompanied by the union's active suppression of opposition among teachers and school staff. Anti-democratic mechanisms have been utilised in several online union regional and town hall meetings, blocking critical voices and shutting down discussion.

Several pseudo-left groups such as Socialist Alternative and Solidarity have collaborated with the bureaucracy, with the latter urging the unions to go even further in opposing lockdowns and other health restrictions.

#### **Mounting global opposition**

Opposition is nevertheless growing, evident in increasingly hostile social media comments directed against the unions from school workers. Some students are also speaking out—the *Age* reported yesterday that significant numbers of senior students in Melbourne's working-class northern suburbs are refusing to return to their classrooms. Some schools, defying government guidelines, are offering online learning options.

Opposition from teachers and students also found expression in the support from Australia and internationally for the October 1 school strike in Britain initiated by Lisa Diaz and parent groups independent of the teacher unions.

The Committee for Public Education has fought from the beginning of the pandemic for the formation of rank-and-file safety committees, independent of the unions, in every school. We have sought to mobilise teachers and school workers in defence of their independent interests, in the face of the unions' insistence that nothing could be done other than following the government's official health advice. Safety committees must be connected 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).

Ruling class fears of a movement from below—of teachers, construction workers, warehouse and retail staff, and health workers among others—were a primary factor in the decision to implement previous lockdowns. Now, however, there is unanimous agreement within the political establishment that lockdowns, once lifted this month, will never again be permitted, even though the health risks to the population have never been as great.

Teachers, school workers, and students need to urgently mobilise—there are no grounds for a “wait and see” attitude given that large scale COVID-19 infection is inevitable if federal and state governments get their way!

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 non-essential workplaces, providing full financial and social support for parents who must stay home with their children until the pandemic is contained, within the framework of an international drive to eradicate coronavirus.

- 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 equipment, should be employed to stop the spread of the virus and 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 abolished. 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 already unbearable workloads. Those continuing online learning must be provided with extra time and professional development, and technical assistance to develop online skills. Extra staff must be employed to conduct such teaching as permanents and on full salary.

These necessary measures 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. Nuclear submarines ordered from the US as part of the preparations for war against China are set to cost more than \$100 billion. The personal wealth of the richest 200 families and individuals has soared during the pandemic and now totals nearly \$500 billion. These resources 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 be realised only through a political struggle against the 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 growing opposition in the international working class must be mobilised to oppose the homicidal policies of the ruling class and fight for the eradication of COVID-19.

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.

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