

Australian Education Union endorses reckless reopening of schools, suppresses teacher opposition

Our reporters
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Like their international counterparts throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, the teacher unions in Australia have collaborated with governments in opening schools amid dangerous conditions.

The Australian Education Union (AEU) is playing a critical role in Victoria, currently the worst affected state in the country, supporting the state Labor government's reckless reopening drive. Under conditions of reported daily infections approaching 2,000, the schools were reopened last week with the AEU's backing.

More than 50,000 Year 12 students returned to school last Tuesday, in order to needlessly sit the General Achievement Test (GAT). On the weekend before the test, about 8,000 students were tested and 33 were positive. How many positive cases were missed among the untested student cohort remains unknown, however the day after the GAT it was reported that four students tested positive forcing the closure of at least eight secondary colleges. This is only a foretaste of the mass infection of children that will follow the staggered return of other year levels between October 18 and November 5.

The union bureaucracy has over the last month sought to condition teachers to the return to face-to-face teaching. In two of its September AEU bulletins, acting as a notice board, it simply forwarded state government and Department announcements on the return of Year 12 students and teachers. On September 22, it issued a press statement enthusiastically welcoming the announcement of the inadequate number of air purifiers to be provided to schools.

The union's position, maintained throughout the pandemic, is that it abides by "public health advice." This is nothing but a cover for its collaboration with state government diktats.

The state Labor government, no less than its Liberal-

National counterpart in New South Wales, is now undermining and sidelining public health officials. This is part of the "reopening" campaign that is driven by the demands of big business and finance capital for a return to "normal" economic conditions, with workers' children dragooned back into the schools so that workplaces can return to pre-pandemic operations, regardless of the health risks.

The *Age* reported last month that Victoria's Chief Health Officer Brett Sutton recommended that schools only reopen once the rate of double dose vaccination for those eligible reaches 80 percent, forecast for November.

The AEU has said nothing about this reported health advice. The union's blanket endorsement of the government's pronouncements is aimed against teachers and school workers developing an objective understanding of the coronavirus science and, based on this, an independent and collectively-determined position on the necessity to keep schools closed amid coronavirus community transmission. Only the Committee for Public Education (CFPE) has fought for such a perspective.

In opposition to this, the union insists that COVID is an occupational health and safety (OHS) issue, to be addressed by school union branches and local health and safety representatives, and even on a classroom by classroom basis. It is being left to teachers in each school to fend for themselves, with the AEU washing its hands of any responsibility for the ensuing casualties.

In tandem with this, the union has sought to prevent discussion within the teaching workforce, and to silence teachers speaking out.

Teachers who have attended recent school-based union meetings have reported AEU officials dismissing requests to publish data on school infections, making the extraordinary claim that this would be a "waste of union

resources” amid ongoing negotiations with the government for a new industrial agreement.

On September 14, at a mass online meeting called to discuss union-government negotiations attended by close to 500 educators, teachers were blocked from speaking, the chat feature on Zoom was disabled, and teachers were limited to writing questions in a separate question box. This blatantly anti-democratic procedure is now becoming the modus operandi of the union, implemented at a previous mass online town meeting.

Despite attempts to bury the issue of COVID at the September 14 meeting, questions on safety, along with issues of workload, dominated, even though the chairperson insisted it was not the “appropriate” time for discussion on the pandemic. Meredith Peace the state president of the union, realising COVID could not be avoided, intervened stating she would address the questions at the end of her report. However, apart from some further general comments about the union following health advice and health orders, Peace failed to answer any specific questions.

At a regional meeting in Broadmeadows, a working-class suburb in Melbourne’s north, which has one of the highest COVID infection rates, the union took the unprecedented and bureaucratic step of accusing teacher members of the CFPE of “disorderly conduct” and threatening to remove them from the meeting. The online meeting was attended by 40 educators, mainly from the Broadmeadows area but included participants from other Melbourne metropolitan areas.

The threats against teachers were initiated by the chairperson following a question by Sue Phillips, a primary school teacher and a member of CFPE, to AEU state deputy secretary Seir Holley, asking what the union’s position was on the return to onsite learning while there is community transmission. Phillips challenged the response of Holley who repeated the union mantra of following government health advice.

The chair then announced that a resolution was to be discussed on COVID later in the meeting and that teachers ought to confine their comments to then. Phillips then requested in the chat, as is normal procedure, that the foreshadowed resolution be posted so that teachers could have time for it to be carefully considered. The procedural proposal was ignored by the chair, even though Phillips’ request was endorsed in the chat by other teachers. This led to a second accusation of “disorderly conduct.”

When the resolution was finally presented for discussion, it proposed a series of minor mitigation

measures for the union to negotiate with the government.

As the chair was attempting to ram through the resolution without calling for other speakers, a teacher from a Broadmeadows primary school intervened. She stated her concern about the reopening of schools under conditions where she would be the only person in her classroom vaccinated, full of young children, who don’t social distance and could not be vaccinated.

“I work in one of the most affected areas in Victoria, we’ve got the highest infection rates, really low vaccination rates, and a high proportion of disadvantaged students,” she explained. “I was at the state-wide meeting last night, and there were several questions raised about COVID and they were largely unanswered by the union. I’m really concerned about the way this meeting’s progressing and the fact that people putting comments in the chat are being stifled, comments completely shut down.”

Another teacher posted in the chat that they were “very shocked at the behaviour” of the chair, adding, “I have been a union member for 45 years & have only heard standing orders invoked in fiery state meetings.”

The anti-democratic and bureaucratic measures reflect the union apparatus’s determination to impose the ruling elite’s school reopening agenda. In Australia as internationally, the teacher unions have worked to suppress opposition and open the schools at the expense of the lives of educators, students, parents and school communities. What has been demonstrated is that lives can be put before profit only through the independent action of teachers, forming rank-and-file safety committees of parents, students, education staff and other sections of the working class to take the necessary, scientifically-based actions.

The CFPE urges all educators and students to contact us to discuss these vital issues.

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