

Australian state Labor government accelerates schools' reopening in Melbourne, pandemic epicentre.

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The state Labor government in Victoria last week announced that it was accelerating its scheduled reopening of schools in Melbourne, despite continued record high COVID-19 infections.

Around 2,000 daily cases are being reported in Victoria, which is the highest total of any state in Australia and represents the most serious spread of infection in the country since the beginning of the pandemic in early 2020.

Schools are being reopened in these dangerous conditions despite there being less than seven weeks to go in the final term of the year, before the extended summer break. Any rational, scientifically-based public policy would involve maintaining online learning at least until the end of the term, in order to prevent needless infections, illnesses, and potentially deaths.

By the time the next term begins, in late January and early February 2022, every eligible student (currently those aged 12 and over) could be fully vaccinated, and schools could be equipped with the necessary safety measures, including high quality air filtration systems for every classroom. It is also likely that by early next year, vaccines for younger children will be approved and rolled out. At that point, leading epidemiologists and medical experts could make an objective assessment as to when and how schools could be safely opened.

The state government is now rushing ahead with its reopening plan because it is being guided not by public health calculations but by *class* calculations.

Throughout Australia, as internationally, the vaccine rollout is being used as the pretext to junk nearly all health restrictions that impinge on the operations of big business. At the behest of the major corporations and finance capital, lockdowns are being permanently ruled out as an emergency health response, and workers are being herded back into their workplaces. The necessary corollary to this is that children are forced back into the schools, so that their parents are not required to stay at home and look after them during working hours.

The Victorian Labor government's measures have a criminally reckless character.

International experience has exposed the numerous lies recycled by the corporate media about COVID and young

people—that children are not infected as easily, that they do not spread the virus like adults do, and they are not at risk of serious illness and death. In reality, in every country where schools have been opened amid widespread community transmission of the virus they have functioned as vectors. Children are at risk of serious illness—some studies have reported that long COVID affects as many as 10 percent of children who contract the virus—as well as death, including from the horrific Multisystem Inflammatory Syndrome in Children (MIS-C).

In the United States, to take just one international experience with children and the virus, more than 5,000 children have developed MIS-C, which causes severe and painful multiple organ swelling and inflammation, sometimes requiring the amputation of limbs. An average of three children are dying in America every day of COVID.

Year 12 students in Melbourne returned to classrooms more than two weeks ago. Joining them this week are students in Years Prep, 1, 2, 5, 6, 7, 10, and 11, with other grade levels joining the staggered return from next week. All students return on a full-time basis from November 5.

Even before these hundreds of thousands of students return, numerous schools have been affected by infection cases. As of last Monday, a total of 134 schools in Melbourne were closed in the previous two weeks. This is due to infections of Year 12 students, children of essential workers for whom the schools were open, and the minimal staff kept on site. Another 216 early childhood centres were non-operational as of Monday due to COVID.

These figures are not publicised by either the government or the media. Members of the Committee for Public Education have been tracking the closures by collating hard-to-access public health data.

Every effort is being made by the ruling elite to present the schools' reopening as a joyous occasion for children, families, and teachers—this is aimed at isolating and intimidating those fearful of the health consequences.

In the meantime, basic safety mechanisms are being junked. At least one teacher and several students at Northcote High

School, in Melbourne's inner northern suburbs, were close contacts of a confirmed COVID-19 case in another student, yet were issued an official exemption from self-quarantine so they could continue to attend school. The staff and students were legally obligated not to leave their homes for two weeks for any reason—except to continue going to school, thereby potentially infecting other people. This represents the sharpest expression of the government's push to "normalise" coronavirus transmission in the schools.

The government last week also announced that Year 12 students will be made to sit their end of year exams even if they are a primary close contact of a positive COVID case. The only minimal precautions are that such potential infection spreaders will be seated in a separate room, and supervised by school staff wearing face shields and healthcare level personal protective equipment.

The government has ordered 50,000 air purifiers for schools. This is far short of the number required and does not even come close to supplying a purifier for each classroom. In addition, only a fraction of the purifiers ordered have actually been delivered, with numerous schools now opening up without a single air purifier or air quality testing device.

The Australian Education Union (AEU) is playing a critical role. It supports the schools' reopening and is actively working to block any move by teachers and school workers to take action in defence of their safety and that of their students. Consistent with its role throughout the pandemic, the union forwards on to teacher-members the latest government edicts to be obeyed, without making any assessment of their potential impact on the health of teachers and students. The AEU is attempting to avoid any discussion on what is unfolding; its social media accounts are filled with posts about competition giveaways, climate change protests, and federal election campaigning—but nothing about this week's schools' reopening.

To the limited extent that the AEU even acknowledges that COVID-19 may be an issue, it presents the pandemic as an occupational health and safety (OHS) matter that is to be addressed by each individual school's union sub-branch and OHS representative.

This is a means of blocking any collective response by the tens of thousands of school workers in the public education system. Instead schools are being left to fend for themselves.

The only meeting organised by the union on the latest COVID-19 surge was a webinar on October 12 for OHS and sub-branch representatives. Taking as a given that the reopening was proceeding, the invitation to the meeting raised the questions: "What covid safety protections are required and how will they apply in schools? What are the challenges in this next stage? How can you and the sub-branch work collectively for highest safety?"

The meeting itself involved the bureaucracy selecting a series of questions to answer on the specifics of school and classroom

functioning—how to handle student refusal to wear masks, what type of masks can be accepted, students' use of toilets during the exam period, crowding around staff room microwaves, etc. The union organised the meeting on anti-democratic lines—the more than 300 participants could not communicate with one another via the Zoom chat function because this was disabled, and questions could be directed to union officials only. Critical questions were ignored, and therefore kept secret from meeting participants. Several teachers who indicated that they wished to speak were ignored throughout the entire meeting.

Among the questions that were censored were several from members of the Committee for Public Education (CFPE). One teacher wrote, "The union has insisted 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. Why is the AEU washing its hands of any responsibility for the ensuing cases and casualties?"

Another unanswered question was: "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. This rate hasn't been reached. Why hasn't the AEU said anything about this reported health advice?"

The CFPE is the only organisation opposing the complicity of the union bureaucracy, and its pseudo-left accomplices, with the state government's dangerous reopening drive. We have called on schools to remain closed wherever there is COVID-19 community transmission, as part of a scientifically based strategy aimed at the elimination of the virus.

Teachers, school workers, students, and working families should contact and join the CFPE. The building of rank and file safety committees in every school, independent of the AEU, is now an urgent task. These committees will develop the widest discussion among educators and within the working class on the dangerous implications of the reopening drive, circulate accurate and up to date information on the spread of infections within the schools, and fight for the necessary actions, including industrial action, against the profit-driven termination of online learning. This is above all a political struggle, directed against both the Liberal-National federal government and the state Labor government.

Contact the CFPE here:

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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