

Teachers must form rank-and-file committees to fight Australia's dangerous school reopenings

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The following remarks were delivered by Sue Phillips, national convenor of the Committee for Public Education (CFPE), at a Socialist Equality Party (Australia) public meeting on Sunday, October 31.

The meeting, which can be viewed in full here, outlined the relationship between anti-democratic electoral laws, aimed at deregistering “minor” parties, the homicidal and pro-business pandemic policies of the ruling elite and the deepening crisis of the capitalist system. Speakers explained that the electoral measures are an attempt to prevent mounting social opposition from finding political expression, and outlined the SEP’s campaign to defeat them.

The CFPE is holding an online meeting for educators, parents, students and workers on Saturday, November 13 at 4pm (AEDT). To participate in the event, entitled “Oppose the dangerous opening of schools in Australia! Form rank-and-file action safety committees!” register here.

On October 5, less than four weeks ago, the Committee for Public Education published a statement titled “Oppose the dangerous reopening of schools in Australia! Form rank-and-file action safety committees!”

On the same day we circulated a video of educators speaking out against the Victorian Labor and the New South Wales (NSW) Liberal-National governments’ pro-business agendas of “living with the virus,” which included the opening of schools and recklessly putting the lives of students, educators, parents and the community at serious risk.

Everything we warned about has been vindicated with surging infections in primary, secondary, specialist schools and childcare centres. In less than a month, more than 300 schools have been closed in Victoria and more than 150 in NSW. In these two states almost 500 schools have closed, and we can say without doubt these figures are an underestimation.

This data is not published by the government, the media, the Australian Education Union or the New South Wales Teachers Federation, which are complicit in this dangerous experiment. All of them are suppressing information about how widespread the infections are, fearing growing parent and teacher opposition.

CFPE members have been diligently tracking the closures, collating hard-to-access public health data, social media and information from parents and teachers. It was only after we began

exposing the alarming numbers on social media, and thousands of parents and teachers began accessing and spreading the data, that the *Age*, the *Guardian* and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation suddenly began highlighting some of the closures.

The refusal of public authorities to publish comprehensive accounts of COVID-related school closures is just one expression of the extraordinary censorship that has accompanied the reopening drive. Basic public health data, including the number of infected teachers and school workers and the source of those infections, is being kept secret.

Some schools have had multiple infections and closed several times in a month but now, under new guidelines, when schools have infections, they don’t have to close, only single classes isolate. What is being implemented in the schools is a policy determined by the corporate and financial elite, best described as “let it rip.”

Even during Term 3, when schools in Sydney and Melbourne were largely working online with only small numbers of children onsite, over 200 schools closed in NSW and nearly 100 in Victoria. Despite these appalling statistics and in defiance of scientific knowledge and bitter international experience, governments have made clear that nothing is to stand in the way.

In mid-September, Daniel Andrews, using language employed by Morrison, and Berejiklian declared: “We cannot permanently suppress this virus... We are opening up, no doubt about that, there will be no turning back. We cannot have a perpetual suppression of this virus. There will be pain, it will be challenging.”

In other words, schools must be opened as the first step in reopening the economy. This is a policy driven not by medical science but by class interests, with the aim of maximising corporate profit without regard for health and safety. Any attempt at eliminating the virus through measures such as lockdowns is to be ended and basic health and mitigation measures removed.

Term 4 began in Victoria with more than 50,000 VCE [Victorian Certificate of Education] students rushed back into the school for General Achievement tests. This was completely unnecessary and led immediately to infections. A similar process took place in NSW during Term 3.

Despite community infections sometimes reaching 2,000 a day in Victoria in recent weeks, staggered school returns were brought forward under new guidelines that lifted previous restrictions; the

same process already underway in NSW.

Senior student examinations are proceeding. Students that are primary close contacts of a positive COVID case are still doing the exams onsite but in a separate room with minimal precautions. In other cases, VCE students who are close contacts of other infected students have been given exemptions from self-quarantining to attend school.

Schools are doing their own contact tracing, deep cleaning has basically been eliminated and only teachers who have had contact with an infected individual for more than two hours have to quarantine. This is being imposed under conditions where a person can be infected with Delta in seconds.

The *Age* reported last weekend that primary close contacts of COVID infected individuals will soon be able to return to the classroom if they return a negative 15-minute rapid antigen test carried out by the school, instead of the Health Department.

This is what normalisation means: a dangerous and potentially-deadly experiment where young children and teachers are being used as guinea pigs and where lives are regarded as expendable.

Similar herd-immunity policies pioneered in the US and UK—accompanied by government and media lies that children are not easily infected, do not spread the virus like adults and are not at risk of serious illness and death—have been devastating. In every country where schools have been opened amid widespread community transmission of the virus, they have functioned as vectors, as shown by the following international data:

United States: On average three children die every day from COVID, with last week a record 26 children perishing from the virus. More than a third of all US child deaths from COVID—234 out of 584 reported fatalities—have occurred in the last three months. Over 2.1 million children have been officially infected with COVID-19 in the same period.

UK: Up to 20,000 children are being infected every day with COVID-19, with a total of 100 children dying so far. One in every 33 children in primary school and 1 in 12 in secondary are infected. In the first two weeks of schools opening in the UK, 59,000 students were infected. Currently 50,000 children are living with long-COVID and 11,000 of them have had symptoms for over a year.

Brazil: COVID is now the leading cause of death among children in Brazil, with 1,518 children aged from 10 to 19 dying from the virus in the first half of 2021.

Indonesia: Over 700 children died from COVID-19 in July alone.

This horrific situation has led to growing opposition among teachers, students and workers. This is most sharply expressed in the school strikes that began on October 1 and 15, led by Lisa Diaz and other UK parents. These strikes and their global online picket are winning ever increasing support from educators and workers everywhere and express the striving of the working class internationally to put lives above profit.

Opposition is emerging in Australia, among teachers and parents who are contacting the CFPE for support and information. Educators from specialist schools as well as teachers of vulnerable children with complex needs are being treated with utter contempt by the government, education departments and the unions. Parents

are reporting schools being totally unequipped to deal with the pandemic or heartbreaking stories of tearful 13-year-olds being sent to school, afraid of bringing COVID home and infecting their younger siblings.

Significantly, the UK schools strikes are being organised outside the teacher unions which internationally have endorsed the murderous policies of their own governments.

From the beginning the unions have unquestioningly echoed and imposed every government announcement. Their modus operandi on school reopenings is to say as little as possible, post nothing on social media about the issue, present COVID-safety as a matter for individual schools and teachers and attempt to silence and intimidate people opposing the reopenings, above all teacher members of the Committee for Public Education.

That is why the CFPE has fought for educators to form rank-and-file safety committees in every school, independent of the unions, to develop the widest public discussion on the dangerous situation in the schools. These committees must be based on the most accurate epidemiological research and the full release of all relevant public health data, including the number of infections in the schools and the number of clusters attributable to the schools' reopening.

On this basis, rank-and-file safety committees can collectively develop the necessary measures to protect the health and safety of educators and students, and potentially organise industrial action and strikes in alliance with other educator rank-and-file committees as part of an international network.

We urge all educators and parents to contact the CFPE, the organising centre for the formation of safety committees, report on the situation in your community's school, alert others to the dangers and join the discussion on the necessary collective and international response. Above else, if you are not an electoral member of the SEP, decide today to join the only political party fighting for a socialist perspective.

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:

wsws.org/contact