

Open letter exposes difficult conditions imposed on final year Australian high school students amid pandemic

Oscar Grenfell
5 November 2021

An anonymous open letter, published online by a year 12 high school student in the state of New South Wales (NSW), has outlined the difficulties imposed on senior pupils by governments and education authorities, as schools are fully-reopened and the exam timetable proceeds, despite the disruptions caused by the pandemic and the ongoing spread of the virus.

The letter, posted last week in a Facebook group that has more than 40,000 student members, is noteworthy, because it gives voice to widespread oppositional sentiments among young people. These are being suppressed in the media and by the authorities as they rush ahead with the pro-business program of lifting all COVID safety restrictions, so that full corporate profit-making activities can resume, whatever the consequences for students' health and lives.

In a sign that it struck a chord with many others, the letter received hundreds of "likes" and many appreciative comments, with students stating that the author had summed up their thoughts and experiences.

The letter was written in the lead-up to Higher School Certificate (HSC) exams, which begin in NSW on November 9. The final year tests were only postponed by several weeks, despite the state still being in the grips of a COVID outbreak that continues to result in hundreds of infections a week. In the neighbouring state of Victoria, year 12 students have already been sitting exams, and are preparing for their final tests this month, even as 1,500 or more cases are announced everyday.

The exams, and official claims that they cannot be postponed further, have been used as a battering ram to force hundreds of thousands of students and teachers back into NSW and Victorian classrooms over recent weeks, as in-person teaching is fully resumed. The reopening of the schools is the spearhead of a push to lift all safety measures, and is aimed at creating the conditions for parents to return in full to their workplaces.

This program is being implemented as hundreds of schools have been hit with COVID outbreaks, and up to a third of all infections this year have been among children and teenagers.

The student said the letter was directed to the New South Wales Education Standards Authority (NESA), the state government body responsible for overseeing examinations and marking. They had decided to post the document publicly, because complaints to NESA were met only with an automated email reply. Indicating a growing politicisation of young people, the student said their comments were also aimed at the NSW Liberal-National government and its Education Minister Sarah Mitchell.

Not only did the letter point to the political forces involved, it

highlighted their underlying motive for compelling year 12 students to take exams, with virtually no additional assistance, despite the pandemic.

The student wrote: "We have seen time and time again the warped priority of money over mental health, marks over adversity, tradition over disadvantage. It is clear that NESA and the health minister view the HSC as a money-making machine and year 12 students as mindless robots, who are able to easily sit through 5–7 3 hour exams and receive a 90+ ATAR with no struggle after a 4-month pandemic."

This had found very concrete expression in the contemptuous attitude of the authorities to the unprecedented situation facing students. After it had been eliminated in most Australian states and territories, COVID returned, with a major outbreak that began in NSW in June, and rapidly spread to Victoria. The explosion of cases was the result of the NSW Liberal-National government refusing to implement adequate lockdown measures, as the Delta variant circulated widely, due to business demands for the economy to remain open.

The NSW and Victorian Labor governments belatedly introduced lockdowns, but they stopped short of the workplace closures required to end the outbreak, and were only aimed at buying time to boost vaccination rates, so these could be invoked to end safety measures for good, and force the population to "live with the virus."

The student explained the impact of the limited lockdown measures, when most learning was online, except for the children of essential workers:

The lack of support from NESA, and those in charge of our education, such as the minister for health and the whole NESA board, has frankly been unacceptable and outright impermissible. Nearly 4 months in lockdown and an extended HSC date and we have received little to no support from those that were elected in such positions for the sole purpose of OUR education.

The country kids in a lockdown, with little to no technology to continue sufficient learning, have suffered. The Sydney kids stuck inside and in LGAs [local government areas under heightened lockdown measures] for 4 months have suffered. The Melbourne students in a 234-day lockdown have suffered.

The constant changing of when we were supposed to go back to school. No graduation. Severely shortened holidays. Hundreds or sometimes thousands of dollars lost in cancelled schoolies and holiday bookings. No opportunity for Christmas

casual employment that is usually so crucial for HSC students in getting their first job. Less opportunity to get into our dream uni course because university institutions are now offering fewer rounds of course places, due to the late release of the ATAR. Severe implications on mental and physical health. No formal. No goodbyes. No closure.

Further, the student pointed to the relationship between social inequality and the impact of the pandemic: “If there is one thing we have learned from this pandemic, it's that COVID is inequitable. The degree to which each student has suffered has been greatly different, yet why are we all sitting the same standardised test that will inherently discriminate against those who suffered the most?”

Mental health had suffered, as a result of the uncertainty. All that had been provided by NESA over recent weeks was a two-minute motivational video.

Giving vent to widespread anger, the student stated: “If those who are in charge of our education are reading this - you should be ashamed. The lack of support for this disadvantaged cohort has been woeful, and it makes me sick to think about how the adversity of the class of 2021 has been ignored, and how those making the decisions have not consulted this cohort whatsoever, making decisions that have inevitably detrimentally impacted on our health holistically.”

The comments refute all of the rubbish in the media, proclaiming the reopening of the schools and the lifting of restrictions as a “return to normal” and the dawning of a new age of “freedom.” Having been through immense and unprecedented experiences over recent months, young people and students are being subjected to massive stress and the danger of COVID infection. This is not to “normalise” their lives, but to normalise the subordination of health, safety, education and everything else to the interests of big business.

The letter, and the response to it, demonstrates that young people want to fight against the conditions they confront. In addition to the rushed school reopening, and the enforcement of the absurd exam timetable, young people who have work are overwhelmingly in low-paid, casual jobs.

They have either lost hours, or their job altogether, during the outbreaks, or been forced to risk their safety for shifts. And now they are on the frontlines of workplaces, aimed at destroying the limited conditions that exist and imposing the “gig-economy” model of job insecurity and poverty-level pay on an entire generation.

In fighting for their rights and interests, young people must know who are their friends and who are their enemies. Any idea that Labor is a “lesser evil” to the Liberal-Nationals would be grossly mistaken. In Victoria, it is a Labor government that is reopening the schools and the economy in the interests of corporate profit. In NSW and federally, the Labor Party oppositions have marched in lockstep with Liberal-National governments. There is no real opposition to the school re-openings or anything else from the Greens, or any other parliamentary party, all of which defend the capitalist system.

The trade unions are no longer workers' organisations, but an industrial and political police force for governments and the corporations, which act in concert with them. They are the ones overseeing students and teachers being herded into unsafe classrooms on behalf of governments.

The perspective of pressuring, or appealing to governments, has also failed. Earlier this year, thousands of students signed petitions demanding that the HSC be postponed or cancelled. These were

courageous and powerful initiatives that won widespread support, but the governments did not listen and the final exams are nevertheless proceeding.

What is required is an independent political movement, directed against all of the capitalist parties, the official media, the unions and the school authorities. The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) fights for a socialist and internationalist perspective.

During the pandemic, the lives of virtually everyone on earth have been transformed and upended. For students and young people especially, the future is one of uncertainty and insecurity. The younger generation has been brought face to face with the bankruptcy of the capitalist system. More than five million lives have been lost, as governments have responded to the pandemic by prioritising corporate profit-interests over lives.

It is not the inherent characteristics of the virus which have caused mass death and illness, but the decisions of governments to adopt “herd immunity” and “live with the virus” policies. The reopening of the schools has been central to this program, not in the interests of the education of young people, but so their parents can be forced back into workplaces and factories.

The climate crisis, the growing threat of war, mounting poverty and joblessness, all point to what this system has in store for young people.

The alternative is to turn to the working class, including teachers and educators, to take up a unified fight to place social interests, including health, education and decent employment, above the profit drive of the banks and the corporations. This requires a political struggle for the socialist transformation of society all over the world.

Contact the IYSSE to discuss this perspective, to take up the fight for socialism, and to share your experiences.

The Committee for Public Education, a group of rank-and-file teachers and school staff, is holding an online meeting for educators, parents, students and workers on Saturday, November 13 at 4pm (AEDT). The IYSSE encourages students and young people to participate in the event, entitled “Oppose the dangerous opening of schools in Australia! Form rank-and-file action safety committees!” Register here.



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact