Australian university union calls for “consensus” with employers on pandemic reopening

Mike Head
22 November 2021

As part of the corporate-driven “live with the virus” campaign, Australian governments and university managements are moving to fully reopen university campuses, like schools, despite the continuing global COVID-19 pandemic.

Even with campuses largely closed during the serious Delta outbreaks in Australia’s southeastern states since June, hundreds of university students have been infected, especially in working-class areas. The University of Western Sydney (WSU) has reported that close to 200 students and numbers of staff members have suffered from the virus.

Nationally well over 1,000 cases, along with multiple deaths, are being reported daily, overwhelmingly in New South Wales (NSW) and Victoria. Schools have become outbreak incubators, forcing the temporary closures of hundreds of schools since classrooms reopened this month.

Globally, the pandemic is resurging, notably in countries such as Germany, the UK and the US, where the ruling elites rushed to lift safety measures for the sake of corporate profit. These countries have similar vaccination rates as Australia’s, which remains only about 70 percent of the entire population, counting children.

Nevertheless, most universities in Australia are already returning staff and students to onsite work and programs—with some even holding physical exams. They have unveiled schedules to resume face-to-face classes by the start of the 2022 academic year. “After 1 February we expect a full return to normal campus life,” WSU has announced.

As in the primary and secondary schools, this push will endanger the health and lives of students and staff alike, and add to risk of wider community transmission. Out of financial necessity, many university students are also workers, often employed in frontline roles, such as in retail, hospitality and welfare services.

International experiences demonstrate the potentially disastrous consequences. In the US, by the end of September, two months into the reopening of colleges and universities for in-person learning, COVID-19 outbreaks had occurred on virtually every major campus across the country. At Texas A&M University, for example, which has almost 67,000 students, 2,970 cases had been reported in one month and one student had died, 20-year-old Kirstyn Katherine Ahuero.

A central component of the Australian government-management plans is to fly in international students, on whose exorbitant fees the systemically under-funded public universities have increasingly depended for the past decade. An added factor in this push is that overseas students have become a crucial source of cheap labour for employers.

Various deals have been struck by governments to bring in plane loads of students from various countries, and a range of vaccines, including China’s, have been recognised to facilitate these flights.

In NSW, 500 students will arrive on chartered planes, paid for by the students, by the end of December. Universities involved in the program include WSU, Macquarie, Sydney, UNSW, University Technology Sydney, Australian Catholic University, Newcastle and Wollongong. Private providers are also involved, including the International College of Management Sydney, Kaplan, Navitas, RedHill and Study Group.

In Victoria, 120 international students will start to arrive per week by the end of this year, in what has been designated “stage one.” Similar schemes have been adopted in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) and South Australia.

© World Socialist Web Site

No quarantining will be required in the ACT. Australian National University Vice-Chancellor Brian Schmidt said it was great "to know that as soon as the borders open our students can come straight home to campus."

Federal Education Minister Alan Tudge gave voice to the mercenary calculations behind these operations in a speech to an education industry body on October 8.

"I cannot be clearer about our desire to get international students back into the country," Tudge said. "They have been an incredible source of revenue for our institutions and other businesses… Of course, they have also been an important source of labour while they are here."

After insisting for months that universities must resume full in-person teaching, Tudge reminded his audience that the international education sector had been Australia's fourth-largest export earner in 2019, generating revenues of $37.6 billion for universities and other businesses.

Tudge reiterated that the reopening "roadmap" adopted by the bipartisan "National Cabinet" stated that international students could start to return at 70 percent adult vaccination levels, and then in larger numbers from 80 percent.

This profit-crazed program has the full support of the university trade unions, including the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU). In a statement issued on September 30, the NTEU said it would pursue a "consensus statement" with Universities Australia, the employers' organisation, on how to fully reopen campuses, supposedly safely.

The union also called on Tudge to convene a group representing unions, university management, peak student organisations and the state, territory and federal governments to "expeditiously" draft "a nationally consistent reopening plan for the nation's universities."

The NTEU statement's only specific suggestions for health and safety were "an audit of all workplaces for appropriate ventilation, capacity for social distancing, adherence to mask and sanitation requirements, and review use of open plan offices and hot-desk workstations."

That lack of any meaningful protection in increasingly overcrowded classrooms is consistent with the advice that the NTEU's website gave its members last year. It said they must not refuse to work in such conditions, as long as "your workplace is practising physical social distancing and hygiene measures."

This response continues the unions' decades-long collaboration with the managements, which has facilitated the intensifying pro-business transformation of universities. At the start of the pandemic, the NTEU offered employers wage cuts of up to 15 percent, supposedly as a "job protection" scheme, but nevertheless said it would accept thousands of redundancies.

That cleared the way for the elimination of what the NTEU itself estimated to be up to 90,000 jobs last year, despite widespread opposition among staff members. This offensive is still being accelerated. At Sydney's Macquarie University, a second "spill and fill" operation is underway to axe hundreds more jobs and force professional staff members to compete with each other for the remaining positions.

To defend their health and lives, university staff, academics and students need to establish rank-and-file committees that are independent of the unions. These committees would ensure that no in-person classes resume until the pandemic is ended.

The necessity for, and scientific viability of, a global fight to eliminate COVID-19 was explained by a panel of leading scientists, epidemiologists and doctors at an October 24 webinar titled, "How to end the pandemic," organised by the WSWS and the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).

Such measures mean rejecting the financial and political dictates of university managements, governments and the corporate elite. There must be a vast redistribution of resources away from the banks, big business and the military, and into education and other essential social needs.

Rank-and-file committees would link up, through the IWA-RFC, with workers worldwide, who are facing similar struggles, and discuss the necessity for an opposed socialist perspective: one that fights for the complete reorganisation of society in the interests of all, not the soaring wealth accumulation of the billionaires.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site