

Growing outrage among Australian teachers and parents over school COVID infections

The Committee for Public Education
1 December 2021

Deep-felt opposition has emerged among teachers and parents since the premature and unsafe reopening of schools in Australia, especially in the two most COVID-19-infected states, New South Wales and Victoria.

Hundreds of schools have had to be temporarily closed or partially closed in each state because of Delta outbreaks among the children. There is mounting anger over the endangerment of health and lives.

The resurgence of the global pandemic and the arrival of the even-more transmissible Omicron variant are heightening fears for the safety of staff and students. While cynically feigning concern for student well-being and education, governments are hell-bent on keeping schools open so that parents can be pushed back into workplaces in order to maximise profits.

With the lifting of health restrictions and the lack of adequate pandemic safety measures in schools, the education sector now has the highest infections by far of all workplaces, significantly ahead of the aged care and health care sectors. The most serious impact is in primary schools, where children are completely unvaccinated.

The Labor and Liberal-National state governments, the education departments, the media and the education trade unions are doing everything they can to cover up what is happening in the schools. Nevertheless, growing opposition to school reopenings is a significant element in the wider hostility toward the political establishment and its callous indifference to the lives and well-being of working people.

Determined to block any turn toward other political parties, the ruling parties rammed through the federal parliament new anti-democratic electoral laws. These laws seek to deregister all parties without seats in parliament unless they submit to the Australian

Electoral Commission the names and details of 1,500 members—trebling the previous requirement—by December 2.

These laws nakedly aim to prop up the widely loathed and discredited political establishment. They are particularly directed at preventing the rising social, economic and political discontent in the working class from taking a more conscious form in support for the Committee for Public Education (CFPE) and the Socialist Equality Party (SEP). If the SEP is deregistered, it will be unable to stand candidates under the party's name in the looming federal election, identifying them as genuine socialist representatives.

Teachers and students are increasingly turning to the information and analysis being published by the CFPE and SEP. Term 4 began with a CFPE statement on October 5 and video opposing the dangerous reopenings.

In that statement, our demands included no return to school in any area where there is COVID-19 community transmission. We also called for full funding and resources for high-quality remote learning, including high-speed broadband access for all, proper personal protective equipment for all school staff, the abolition of all gag measures on teachers, and the employment of extra staff to overcome the huge workload increases produced by combined online learning and in-class teaching.

Within days our warnings were vindicated with growing infections. Having started to collect data on school infections in Term 3, we began daily postings of the information that we independently collected and collated.

Our postings of the list of infected schools have gained a wide following, particularly in Victoria, where around a thousand new Delta cases are still being

reported every day. By the end of October, our posts had a reach of more than 20,000 people.

Many teachers and parents wrote to us or posted on social media to thank us for providing them with information that they could not otherwise access and for giving them a voice.

One teacher wrote: “I have seen your posts on Facebook and I am a teacher and agree entirely with what you are saying about the opening of schools, however can’t say anything publicly.” Another asked: “Why is no-one speaking about this in the media? It’s unbelievable.”

One widely-shared comment by a parent on our Facebook page was accompanied by a photo of children lining up at a COVID testing centre in a Melbourne western suburb. “Today to see so many primary and kinder-aged kids in the queue was very, very sad,” she wrote. “[E]very time I pass the address, I seem to see mums, and some dads, walking their masked little kid/s there. Some poor mums trying to manage a bundle of littlies.”

As a *World Socialist Web Site* article recorded, teachers and parents started to report to us many other examples of school infections that were being buried by the authorities.

The unions—the Australian Education Union (AEU) and the New South Wales Teachers Federation (NSWTF)—are complicit in this reopening drive. Throughout the pandemic, they have echoed every official pronouncement on the supposed safety of schools, while undermining every effort of teachers and school workers to defend their safety and that of their students.

Like governments around the world, those in Australia, both Labor and Liberal-National, are seeking to force the population to “live with” COVID-19, no matter what the terrible consequences. A scientifically-based strategy of eradicating the virus has been dismissed, and basic mitigation measures are being junked as part of the “let it rip” agenda.

In the latest indication of the discontent brewing up in schools, teachers in NSW are due to strike for 24 hours on December 7 to demand improved pay and conditions, the first such stoppage in ten years. This reflects widespread anger over ever-greater workloads, stagnant pay as the cost of living soars, and the reopening of the schools amid COVID transmission.

Against the efforts of all the pro-capitalist unions to stifle this opposition, the CFPE calls for the formation of rank-and-file committees of educators, parents and students to mobilise opposition, as part of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, launched by the Socialist Equality Parties to develop a global counteroffensive of the working class.

We urge the widest support for, and involvement in, the Global Workers Inquest into the COVID-19 Pandemic initiated by the *World Socialist Web Site* to expose the criminal policies of the capitalist ruling elites and their governments.

The opposition to the dictates of big business can only go forward if it is guided by a socialist program that puts the social needs of working people—first and foremost their health and lives—ahead of the private profits of the wealthy few.

We therefore appeal to all CFPE supporters and all working people, students and youth to become electoral members of the SEP. That is essential, not just to help ensure that the SEP retains its party registration, but to take forward the fight for a genuine socialist alternative. We also urge teachers and parents to consider applying to become full members of the SEP to build the new leadership that the working class requires to overturn the capitalist profit system.



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