

Striking NSW teachers must fight for school shutdown to stop the spread of Omicron in Australia!

The Committee for Public Education
5 December 2021

More than 50,000 public school teachers in New South Wales (NSW), Australia's most populous state, are set to carry out their first full-day strike in a decade. Tuesday's action expresses a mounting wave of anger among educators, and broader sections of the working class, over stagnant wages amid a soaring cost of living and increasingly unbearable working conditions.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, the situation in the public schools was a disaster. Classroom sizes have risen continuously. Massive workloads mean that teachers carry out hours of unpaid labour every week.

State governments, Labor and Liberal-National, have spent billions on pro-business infrastructure projects but refuse to invest in schools. An ever-greater number of schools are forced to set up demountables to accommodate rising enrollments.

Teachers' wages have effectively been frozen for more than ten years as a result of public sector pay caps, far beneath the rate of inflation. The crisis is such that educators are leaving the profession in droves. A survey last month found nine in ten teachers in NSW were considering quitting.

The New South Wales Teachers Federation (NSWTF) is seeking to chain teachers' opposition within the narrow framework of another industrial agreement. These have been used to decimate the jobs, wages and conditions of the entire working class for decades and to suppress the class struggle. The union is keeping teachers separated from their colleagues in Victoria, who face the same issues, and is seeking to let off steam with only limited industrial action.

The NSWTF's demands for marginal pay increases and two extra hours a week to deal with workloads would do nothing to address the crisis teachers' face. But the union will not even fight for these cosmetic changes. Its fawning appeals to the NSW Liberal-National government of extreme right-wing free-marketeer Dominic Perrottet demonstrate that yet another betrayal is being prepared.

The Committee for Public Education (CFPE) warns that the NSWTF and the other trade unions are the chief obstacle to a genuine fight for decent conditions. The NSWTF has suppressed even limited strike action over the past decade, and has signed one rotten industrial agreement after another, enforcing the wage caps and paving the way for all the conditions that teachers are opposing.

On the most important question that teachers and all workers confront—the pandemic—the NSWTF and the other education unions are as one with the governments and the corporate elite. COVID-19 has exposed the mealy-mouthed bleating of the unions about teachers' conditions. The NSWTF and its counterparts have shown that they are willing, not only to impose rotten sell-outs, but to play Russian roulette with the health and the lives of the teachers they falsely claim to represent.

It is less than two months since the NSWTF herded teachers and hundreds of thousands of students back to the classrooms, amid widespread Delta transmission. The Australian Education Union (AEU) did the same in Victoria, while the Independent Education Union (IEU) oversaw the full reopening of independent and religious schools.

This was the spearhead of the ending of even limited lockdowns, the lifting of all safety restrictions and a ruling-class campaign to force the population to "live with" the virus. In this homicidal program, dictated by corporate profit interests, the schools must be fully opened so that parents can be forced back to their workplaces.

What has been the consequence? Last month, NSWTF president Angelo Gavirelatos admitted that more than 500 NSW public schools had been hit with COVID infections in term four. In Victoria, the CFPE has recorded over 780 school outbreaks, with education the largest sector for coronavirus clusters.

Having promoted government propaganda about the school reopenings being beneficial for student wellbeing and teachers' conditions, the unions have helped develop a regime in the schools that can be described only as a Kafkaesque nightmare. Most schools have no mitigations, with official advice being that teachers should open the windows for ventilation. When COVID is detected in classrooms that have been transformed into petri dishes for the virus, the sole priority of the unions, the education departments and the governments is to ensure that the school remains open.

Teachers, parents and students are told nothing about the extent of the spread in their school. The unions and the education departments publish no overall record of school closures. The data on Victoria has been compiled by the CFPE through press reports, parent and teacher accounts and the scraps of information dripped out by the education departments.

How many infections have occurred in the schools? Have any teachers or students who contracted the virus at school become seriously ill, or even died, from COVID-19? The union executives and their co-conspirators in the government know the answers to these questions, but are keeping teachers in the dark.

Essential conclusions need to be drawn

The CFPE insists that teachers and school staff cannot accept this situation any longer. They must draw conclusions from the experiences of the pandemic, and the decades of betrayal and sell-outs before then, and take matters into their own hands:

First, the NSWTF, the AEU and the other education unions are a police force of governments and the education departments.

Second, new organisations of struggle are required, including an interconnected network of rank-and-file committees, to break the conspiracy of silence surrounding COVID infections, share information and prepare a genuine industrial and political fight for decent conditions and pay. A central task of such committees would be to unify the struggles of teachers in NSW, Victoria, across the country and internationally.

Third, the mass infections show that schools cannot operate safely amid widespread community transmission of COVID. The cutting edge of the fight for all of the rights of educators is the fight to shut the schools so that no more teachers or students are infected with a disease that could claim their lives or leave them with dire medical issues, such as debilitating long-COVID and permanent organ damage.

The urgency of this struggle is demonstrated by the emergence of the new Omicron variant, which has been identified at two schools in the working-class southwestern suburbs of Sydney, St Peter Chanel Catholic Primary School and Regents Park Christian School.

Epidemiologists have warned that Omicron is likely far more infectious even than Delta. And its dozens of mutations mean that it may be resistant to existing vaccines or severely impact their efficacy. The variant appears particularly dangerous to kids, with children under two accounting for 10 percent of all hospitalisations in Gauteng Province, South Africa's Omicron epicentre.

Despite all this, Australian governments, Labor and Liberal-National alike, have allowed the virus to enter the country and are letting it spread. Government officials and corporate outlets have claimed, without a shred of evidence, that the new variant "may be milder" than Delta, with some claiming that its widespread transmission would be a positive.

As they have been throughout the pandemic, teachers and students are on the frontlines. And as has also been the case for the past two years, the unions are placing them in the firing line. The AEU, the NSWTF and the IEU have not said a single word about Omicron.

Why not? Because they are committed to keeping the schools open on behalf of the governments and big business, so that nothing disrupts the "reopening of the economy" and the corporate bonanza being prepared over the holiday season.

There are only a handful of weeks left of the school year, and most students have completed their coursework. The only rational and scientifically-based program, to protect the health of teachers and students and prevent the spread of Omicron, is to immediately

shut the schools and end the school year early. That is what teachers, parents and students must fight for, and they can only do it through a rebellion against the unions and the establishment of rank-and-file committees.

The issues confronting educators are always bound up with broader social questions. The gutting of public education is part of a wholesale offensive against the jobs, wages, conditions and social rights of the entire working class. It is an essential component of the social regression that has seen the emergence of a financial oligarchy, richer than any in history, amid mass poverty, insecure work, unemployment and misery.

In the pandemic, two fundamentally opposed social principles are evident, based on definite class interests. One, adopted by governments, the unions and the ruling elite they represent, insists that everything, including health and lives, must be subordinated to the stock market. Nothing, even mass death, can get in the way of the profits of the ultra-wealthy.

The other insists that public health, science and the rights of working people must take precedence. Properly-organised lockdowns and other public health measures, including an end to in-person teaching where the virus is circulating, must be deployed to stop transmission, eliminate the virus and end the pandemic.

This perspective is both possible and necessary. Principled epidemiologists have explained that elimination can be carried out. The experiences in China and New Zealand have proven them correct. And there is a growing wave of opposition to the homicidal "herd immunity" policy, expressed in parent-initiated school strikes in Britain, stoppages in Brazil and the mass anger that exists among teachers in Australia.

But this movement must take organised form, through the establishment of rank-and-file committees, and it requires a new political perspective. The pandemic has demonstrated that capitalism is at war with society. Nothing, from teachers' lives to public education and health, can be guaranteed in a society where everything is dictated by the billionaires. The alternative is a fight for socialism: the reorganisation of society to meet social need, not private profit.

The CFPE urges educators, parents and students to contact us today to take up the fight for school shutdowns, elimination of the virus and a socialist perspective.

Attend the CFPE meeting "COVID-19 spreads through Australian schools: Lives before profit! Stop the pandemic!" this Saturday, December 11, at 2pm (AEDT). Register here: https://us06web.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_9W5mwc1kSoSEQ0Sv1R7ZDA

And to contact the CFPE:

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To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact