

Amid record COVID infections, say no to Australian school reopenings! Educators, students, parents—join the fight for rank and file safety committees!

The Committee for Public Education
12 January 2022

The Committee for Public Education urgently appeals to all teachers, school workers, students, and parents to unite against the planned reopening of schools across Australia in late January and early February.

If allowed to proceed amid unprecedented COVID infections, the beginning of the academic year will see a further explosion in case numbers, inflicting suffering and death that is entirely preventable. Working people should form rank-and-file safety committees within every school community that will take forward the fight for online teaching and learning, as an essential measure within a broad emergency response aimed at eliminating the dangerous coronavirus.

The extended summer holiday that separates the end and beginning of the academic year in Australia has coincided with an explosion of the Omicron variant. On December 17, the last day of Term 4 in several states, the daily COVID case tally in Australia was 4,004. Now around 100,000 cases are registered daily, though this is an enormous underestimate of the real level of infection.

Reopening schools in these conditions would represent an appalling social crime.

International scientists have repudiated media and government claims that Omicron is a “mild” virus and that children especially require no protection from infection. Maria Van Kerkhove, the technical lead of COVID-19 response at the World Health Organization, recently characterised the “mild” designation as “dangerous” misinformation.

The impact on children is especially concerning. Last week saw 672 children hospitalised in the United States *each day*, more than double the week before. Long COVID is causing widespread suffering, with studies suggesting up to 10 percent of all children who contract the virus develop debilitating long-term symptoms.

Australian children are threatened with being herded into unsafe classrooms in conditions where large numbers of those under 12 have not been able to access vaccine due to supply shortages and related booking problems.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison has insisted that schools should operate on a business-as-usual basis. “Our objective is go back, stay back, day one term one,” he declared on Monday.

The homicidal campaign to condition the population to “live with the virus” is a bipartisan one, uniting the Labor and Liberal parties. State Labor premiers comprise the majority of the so-called national cabinet that last year coordinated the deliberate sabotage of Australia’s previous COVID mitigation measures and this year is accelerating the dismantling of even the most minimal of protections as part of its “herd immunity” policy.

Some state governments are reportedly considering delaying the start of term, following the recent announcement of Queensland Premier Annastacia Palaszczuk that schools there would open on February 7 rather than January 24. This measure will serve only to postpone, not avoid, mass infection of children and school staff.

The ruling elite is united behind the campaign to reopen the schools because this measure is at the cutting edge of the wider agenda of returning all workers to their workplaces and at the same time permanently rescinding all public health measures that impinge on the operations of big business. Teachers and students are to be sacrificed on the high altar of corporate profit.

Working class schools and communities will inevitably be the worst affected. The wealthiest private schools, which receive enormous public subsidies every year, will continue to make their own arrangements, sourcing air filtration systems and providing remote learning options. Run down and overcrowded public schools in working class areas, on the other hand, will be major vectors for the spread of the virus.

Teachers and school workers need to organise independently of the teaching unions, including the Australian Education Union (AEU) and New South Wales Teachers Federation (NSWTF).

Throughout the pandemic, in Australia and internationally, the trade unions have collaborated with governments and business against the right of all workers to a safe workplace. Within the schools, the AEU and NSWTF have echoed the unsafe government and Department of Education guidelines for “managing” the COVID threat. Union officials also collaborated with governments in suppressing the data on the number of schools affected by COVID outbreaks last year.

The union bureaucracy’s considerable wealth and privileges ultimately derive from its collaboration with the state. AEU

federal president Correna Haythorpe receives nearly \$275,000 annually in salary and benefits, placing her comfortably within the top 1 percent of all income earners.

Haythorpe last Saturday declared that in the event of mass infections within the schools, some closures may prove necessary. “If you can’t provide supervision and duty of care, governments will have to consider how particular schools pivot to remote learning,” she stated.

In other words, if mass infections create a staffing crisis, as has happened across the US and in other countries, there may be no alternative but to switch to online learning. Until then, as far as the union is concerned, teachers ought to do nothing as infections emerge and start to rise in school communities.

Educators and parents cannot passively accept a situation in which they and their students and children are sitting ducks for the virus!

The Committee for Public Education (CFPE) urges all teachers, school workers, students and parents to contact us and join the fight for rank-and-file safety committees.

The CFPE, initiated by the Socialist Equality Party, has a principled record of fighting for the interests of teachers, school staff, and the working class. In collaboration with educator rank-and-file committees internationally, developed through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), the CFPE has mobilised teachers independently of, and in opposition to, the teacher unions.

In the American city of Chicago, teachers have pointed the way forward for their brothers and sisters internationally. Before being sold out and sent back to the schools by the Chicago Teachers Union, educators defied demands that they teach in highly dangerous conditions and demanded a transition to online learning.

Likewise in Britain, parent Lisa Diaz organised action independently of the unions and establishment parties through the #SafeEdforAll campaign, which involved coordinated parent boycotts of face-to-face learning.

In this third year of the global pandemic, a rational and scientifically based approach to the virus is more urgent than ever before. The protection of human life and safety must take unconditional priority over all corporate-financial interests.

The CFPE recognises that the only viable strategy is to work towards the elimination of the virus, implementing Zero Covid through the adoption of the necessary measures as advised by leading epidemiologists, virologists and other scientists.

The CFPE demands the following accompanying measures:

- No return to school in any area where there is COVID-19 community transmission! The only children who ought to be on site are those of emergency workers, who do not have other family to care for them, and this must be organised with the strictest safety precautions, including having high quality air filtration systems for every indoor site where children and adults are compelled to gather.

- Full income support for all workers affected by the cessation of non-essential production and the closure of schools.

- Full funding and resources for high-quality remote learning, including high-speed broadband access for all, and expert technical

support to train and assist educators.

- Nurses and medical professionals must be allocated to every school, with vaccinations made available to every student and school worker. Publicly-funded psychologists and other support staff must be made available to students who are at risk from the disruption to their normal education.

- Workloads must be reduced, including through lowered face-to-face teaching hours. Teachers should not be expected to do both online learning and in-class teaching, adding to already unbearable workloads. Those continuing online learning must be provided with extra time and professional development, and technical assistance to develop online skills.

- No teacher should be victimised for calling attention to unsafe conditions! All gag measures, such as public service codes of conduct, which restrict teachers from speaking publicly about what is happening in the schools, must be abolished.

- Similarly, there must be no sanctions of any kind threatened against parents or caregivers who decide not to send their children into unsafe schools.

- Ongoing and accessible information must be provided of COVID-19 outbreaks at schools. The censorship must end! Last term, the scale of the crisis in the schools was revealed only due to the CFPE’s work in tallying the daily closures and clusters in schools in NSW and Victoria.

The costs of fighting the pandemic must be borne by corporations and a 100 percent tax on the windfall pandemic profits obtained by large investors through the stock market boom. These demands, crucial to ensuring the safety of educators and of all workers, can be realised only through a political struggle against the state and federal governments, and the capitalist profit system they defend.

The experiences of the past months have demonstrated that the basic social rights of workers are incompatible with a society subordinated to the dictates of big business. The CFPE calls for the widest discussion among educators on the necessity for a socialist program, which would involve the establishment of a workers’ government, and the implementation of policies based on social need, not private profit, including free, high-quality education for all, from kindergarten to the tertiary level.

Register for the CFPE meeting, “No to Australian school reopenings amid record COVID infections! Educators, students, parents—join the fight for rank-and-file safety committees!” It will be held online on January 23 at 11am (AEDT).

Contact the CFPE:

Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com

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To contact the WSW and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

www.wsws.org/contact