

Australian prime minister demands schools reopen to maintain workforce for corporations

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Prime Minister Scott Morrison has indirectly acknowledged the class issues involved in the push to open schools across Australia as scheduled later this month and in early February, despite record COVID-19 infection rates.

Speaking last Thursday, Morrison provided a semi-honest rationale for the demand for a resumption of face-to-face teaching. “If schools don’t open, then that can add an additional five percent to the absenteeism in the workforce,” he declared. “So it is absolutely essential for schools to go back safely and to remain safely open if we are not to see any further exacerbation of the workforce challenges we’re currently facing. So schools open means shops open... That’s what schools open means, and it’s very important they go back.”

Children, teachers, and school workers are being told to accept the risk of infection and serious health consequences in the interests of big business and finance capital.

To ensure the continued flow of profits, workers need to be tied to their workplaces. Therefore, workers’ children must not be permitted to remain safely at home, engaged in online learning, because there would then be a need for parental supervision. Teachers and school workers are to effectively function as babysitters, with their health and safety put at risk for the interests of the ultra-wealthy.

Under the “national plan” drawn up by state and federal governments, Labor and Liberal, there are to be no more lockdown restrictions or other emergency public health measures that impinge on corporate profit making. A “let it rip” policy is being enforced—regardless of how high the rate of infection, hospitalisation, and death—based on declarations that the population must “live with the virus” and accept mass illness and death in the foreseeable future. This program, previously associated with the most

extreme right-wing administrations, such as those of Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro and British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, is now being advanced by the entire political establishment in Australia.

Morrison’s remarks on the urgency of reopening the schools did not include a single reference to children’s learning, mental health, or wellbeing. As far as the ruling elite has been concerned, these matters have never been anything other than propaganda points, cynically invoked to justify its pro-business agenda.

The prime minister’s talk about opening schools “safely” is nothing but hot air. In every country, when schools have opened amid COVID community transmission, they have served as vectors of infection spread.

Australian state governments have failed to put in place even the most basic mitigation measures. Teachers will not be provided with proper N95 or KN95 masks, the overwhelming majority of classrooms will lack an air filtration system, and only a minority of children will be vaccinated.

Approximately three-quarters of 12–15-year-olds have been double vaccinated, while 5–12-year-olds have only become eligible to be vaccinated earlier this month. Supply shortages have resulted in parents enduring multiple vaccination booking cancellations. Only a small minority within this age group will have received any vaccination when the schools open, and none will be double jabbed and have had the necessary time to allow the vaccine to take full effect.

The impact will be felt most heavily within working class public schools. Within Australia’s deeply divided education system, nearly 40 percent of students attend private schools that receive enormous annual public subsidies. The wealthiest of these will have used the

summer holiday break sourcing supplies of masks, air filtration systems for every classroom, and making preparations to provide remote learning options for their students. Many private schools have already hired medical professionals to deliver vaccination doses on their campuses, allowing priority access for their students.

Many working-class public schools, on the other hand, feature overcrowded classrooms with little or no ventilation whatsoever. Under-staffed and under-resourced, they are ill equipped to deal with the complex issues that are going to emerge when mass outbreaks occur.

State governments, again both Labor and Liberal, are no longer making much effort to conceal the inevitability of such outbreaks if the schools reopen as planned.

Anticipating widespread COVID infection among teachers, the New South Wales state Liberal government of Premier Dominic Perrottet and Victorian Labor government of Premier Daniel Andrews have closely collaborated on a “plan” involving allowing parents to supervise children in classrooms in the event of mass staff illness, and drafting final year university student teachers and retired educators into the workforce.

These are all grossly irresponsible measures. Parents and university students are not qualified and vetted educators. Retired teachers, being elderly, are at high risk of serious COVID health consequences, and ought to be protected from the virus, not placed within petri dishes of infection.

Currently serving teachers will meanwhile be exposed to the virus on a near daily basis. These include vulnerable educators, such as those with compromised immune systems, significant comorbidities, those pregnant and elderly. Talk of providing large quantities of rapid antigen tests (RATs) amounts to nothing more than a token window dressing measure that will do nothing to prevent the spread of infection.

Morrison’s statement on the workforce rationale for opening the schools was met with widespread anger.

One NSW high school teacher, Kristen Angela, defied Department of Education gag orders to speak out and issue an open letter to the prime minister that was widely shared on social media. “Mr Morrison, sadly what these two years have taught me is that because I am a teacher in a public school—a government employee, I am expendable,” she wrote. “Somehow because I chose to educate the future generations of this country, my health, wellbeing and that of my family, friends and colleagues is irrelevant so long as the country’s economy isn’t

suffering. [...] Mr Morrison, let me make something perfectly clear, the staff working in schools are not glorified babysitters despite the overwhelming evidence from our leaders that this is what we are seen to be.”

In opposition to the class policy on behalf of big business being advanced by state and federal governments, teachers and educators need to advance a class policy defending the health and safety of the entire working class, based on the struggle for scientifically based pandemic policies.

These must include the suspension of regular schooling and the resumption of online teaching and learning, as part of a wider suspension of non-essential production and other activities amid dangerously high levels of COVID transmission. Enormous resources must be allocated to this program, including 100 percent income support for affected workers and small business owners, and the provision of related social services and support measures, including for children adversely affected by remote learning.

This perspective can only be fought for by teachers and school workers independently of the teacher unions, which are collaborating with the schools’ reopening drive and are working to suppress and dissipate educators’ anger and opposition. The Committee for Public Education and the Socialist Equality Party are alone in advancing this program and we urge all teachers, school workers, parents, students, and workers to attend our public meeting, “No to Australian school reopenings amid record COVID infections! Educators, students, parents—join the fight for rank-and-file safety committees!” being held Sunday, January 23, at 11 a.m. (AEDT).

Register today!



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