

Australian teacher unions collaborate with school reopening drive amid record COVID infections

Patrick O'Connor
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The campaign to reopen Australia's schools later this month and in early February is being actively supported by the Australian Education Union (AEU) and all of its state affiliates.

Since the very beginning of the pandemic in early 2020, the teacher unions have collaborated with state and federal governments, Labor and Liberal, to implement the various official diktats.

The refusal of the union bureaucracy to defend the basic rights of teachers and school workers, however, has never been as stark as it is now. In the next weeks, tens of thousands of educators and hundreds of thousands of their students are to be herded into overcrowded and poorly ventilated classrooms, with only around three-quarters of 12–16 year olds double vaccinated (none boosted, because they remain ineligible) and not a single 5–11 year old having received more than one jab.

The reopening of the schools in such conditions will inevitably trigger a further wave of infections, causing serious illnesses and deaths. This entirely preventable scenario represents an enormous social crime.

In response, the teacher unions' only substantive complaint is that the federal government is not working as closely with them as it could to organise the schools reopening.

On January 7, the federal AEU leadership issued a statement directed to the federal government of Prime Minister Scott Morrison. It emphasised that "the AEU is ready to work with governments," and called for "clear guidelines and protocols that school communities can easily understand and have confidence in ready to go for the start of the school year."

In other words, schools can and should reopen, so long as the "messaging" is properly developed to minimise and suppress opposition from parents, students and teachers.

On January 13, the AEU reacted nervously to Morrison's unveiling of the so-called national plan for the school reopening. The prime minister notably made no pretence that the reopening had anything to do with children's learning or wellbeing, instead bluntly explaining that students had to be in school so their parents could be at their workplaces, for the good of the "economy" (see: "Australian prime minister demands schools reopen to maintain workforce for corporations

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This, the AEU complained, was "deeply offensive" to teachers and amounted to saying "schools must be open to provide a babysitting service for the broader workforce."

The union expressed concern over the government's revised isolation guidelines for teachers who are close contacts of a COVID infected person. In an attempt to minimise the looming staffing crisis, the government now insists that teachers who are close contacts must isolate for a week in their homes, not seeing family and friends and not shopping for groceries or other necessities—but they can and must go to their classrooms to teach, provided they are cleared by an unreliable rapid antigen test (RAT).

The AEU warned that the isolation guidelines "will exacerbate the health and safety concerns that are already being expressed by our members." It advised teachers to use their leave instead of going into school, "if they feel vulnerable as a close contact or they are worried about the potential risk to others."

These mealy mouthed statements were driven by fear that the government's provocative moves will trigger opposition from teachers and school workers.

The AEU's January 13 statement requested a "clear path forward," based on three things: "guidelines for the reopening of schools," priority access to RATs and PCR tests, and funding to "accommodate social distancing, hygiene, ventilation and any other public health measures." These policies will not be implemented. Even in the event they were, however, such minimal mitigation measures would not resolve the inherently unsafe practice of crowding dozens of people together within a room in conditions of large scale spread of a dangerous airborne pathogen.

The AEU's real concern was reiterated in the concluding sentence of its statement: "We stand ready to work constructively with all governments."

The union's position was denounced by several teachers on social media. One wrote: "Is the AEU going to do anything? How many fellow teachers need to be martyred for the economy before you do something? Is this a union or a

government focus group? Call a goddamn strike.”

All the AEU state affiliates know they are sitting atop a powder keg.

In New South Wales (NSW) and Victoria, which have the highest daily COVID infections, the union bureaucracy is attempting to stifle all discussion. The NSW Teachers Federation Facebook page does not allow any comments on its posts. This follows the Teachers Federation’s organisation of a strike last month involving 50,000 teachers over working conditions, in which no union official at the official rally once mentioned COVID.

The AEU’s Victorian branch has not blocked teacher comments on Facebook—but instead effectively pretends that there is no pandemic. There has not been a single post on the explosion of Omicron infections, nor on the pending school reopening. To find any reference whatsoever to COVID, one needs to scroll back to November last year for a post about children’s outdoor learning that included a passing reference to the pandemic.

The unions in these states have remained silent on the close collaboration of Victorian Labor Premier Daniel Andrews and his NSW Liberal counterpart Dominic Perrottet, while these figures jointly insist that schools must reopen at the beginning of term as scheduled.

In Queensland, the state Labor government has postponed the start of school by two weeks. This will only postpone and not prevent an upsurge in infections. The Queensland Teachers Union has nevertheless boasted of securing a major victory with this measure, as it has over yesterday’s government announcement that the school year will not be extended in December by an equivalent two weeks to compensate for the delay. Teachers again responded on social media to the union’s self-congratulations with demands for remote learning.

In South Australia, the state Liberal government’s plan involves beginning the school year as scheduled on February 2 for only some year levels—reception (foundation) and Years 1, 7, 8 and 12. Other year levels are to do remote learning for two weeks and then return to their classrooms on February 14. The AEU’s state branch is this week balloting the membership for a one-day strike on February 2. The union has called on the government to postpone for a fortnight the start of the school year for all year levels. If this is conceded, the bureaucracy has explained, the strike will be called off.

As elsewhere, the South Australian AEU opposes remote learning to keep teachers and students safe during the pandemic.

Its posturing over possible limited industrial action is directed towards containing opposition from below. Across Australia, the pandemic’s impact on teachers and school workers is intersecting with longstanding workplace pressures, including crushing workloads, teacher shortages, and inadequate salaries. The South Australian AEU rammed through the last enterprise bargaining agreement in 2020, which involved a real wage cut

and the maintenance of poor working conditions, in the face of enormous opposition. A narrow 54-46 percent vote ratified the agreement.

The teacher unions’ role in the pandemic, including their lockstep support for the looming reopening of the schools, is an expression of the material interests of the bureaucracy. Through industry superannuation funds, the unions are tied to the stock market and the interests of finance capital.

The upper echelons of the bureaucracy comprise an immensely privileged, upper-middle class stratum, whose personal incomes place them comfortably within the top 1 percent of earners. AEU federal president Correna Haythorpe receives nearly \$275,000 annually in salary and benefits, while outgoing NSW Teachers Federation secretary John Dixon receives \$320,000.

These privileges are dependent upon the union’s collaboration with the state, against the interests of teachers and school workers.

The Committee for Public Education (CFPE) has called on educators to form rank-and-file safety committees, independent of the union bureaucracy, to take forward the fight for the suspension of normal school operations amid the pandemic. Remote learning needs to be organised for all students, except as required for the children of emergency workers and of vulnerable families, as part of an emergency suite of measures including 100 percent income protection for all affected workers and small business owners and a massive increase in spending on the necessary resources to support children and their teachers.

These political issues will be discussed at the important upcoming online public meeting organised by the CFPE, “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 11 a.m. (AEDT). We encourage all teachers, school workers, parent, students, and working people to register in advance.

Contact the CFPE:

Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com

Facebook: www.facebook.com/commforpubliceducation

Twitter: [@cfpe_australia](https://twitter.com/cfpe_australia)



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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