

Australian Labor and Coalition governments sending hundreds of thousands of children and teachers into COVID-infested schools

Martin Scott
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Yesterday, amid a continuing wave of mass COVID-19 infection and death, leaders of the two worst-affected states, New South Wales Liberal-National Premier Dominic Perrottet and his Victorian Labor counterpart Daniel Andrews, unveiled their plans to reopen schools for face-to-face learning next week.

Underscoring the complete bipartisanship of the “let it rip” policies that have resulted in the unprecedented surge of the pandemic in Australia, Andrews described the two states’ plans as “pretty much identical.”

In earlier stages of the COVID crisis, Andrews was identified with limited lockdown and public health measures, implemented under pressure from the working class.

By contrast, Perrottet, an extreme right-wing free-marketeer, is a longstanding proponent of “herd immunity.” The NSW premier was installed in a “corruption” coup late last September, in time to turbo-charge the lifting of lockdown measures and preside over UK-style “freedom days.” He has gone from being largely unknown less than six months ago, to among the most widely-despised political figures in the country, alongside Prime Minister Scott Morrison.

Under these conditions, Andrews is playing the decisive role in legitimising the homicidal pandemic policies. He collaborated for weeks with Perrottet on the school plan and insists, as one with Morrison and the NSW leader, that there is no alternative to mass infection, including of children.

Andrews and Perrottet, working with Morrison, are laying down a blueprint for every other state and territory government, Labor and Liberal. Though some are delaying the start of term slightly for fear of widespread opposition, all are committed to the reopening.

The scale of what is being prepared was indicated by a *Guardian* report, stating that education administrators had been provided with advice that up to 20 percent of teachers could be off sick at any one time. In NSW and Victoria, thousands of university students, retired educators and principals are being recruited to keep the schools running as masses of teachers are infected with a potentially-deadly virus.

Under the reopening plans, staff and students will take two

rapid antigen tests each week, but schools will not close if students test positive and there will be no contact tracing by state health departments. Instead, it will be left up to individual schools to contact parents advising them to monitor their children for symptoms.

The abolition of systematic tracing and the determination that schools will not close make clear that the surveillance-testing program is not about preventing the spread of the disease, but about creating a false sense of security for teachers and parents. The twice-weekly testing is planned to continue for just the first four weeks of term.

Mass gatherings, including assemblies, organised sport and excursions, will go ahead in both states. In Victoria, pupils in grade three and above will have to wear masks, while in NSW, masks will be mandated only for high school students.

As has been the case throughout the pandemic, the unions are playing a key role in herding teachers and students back into classrooms. NSW Teachers Federation (NSWTF) President Angelo Gavrielatos responded to the announcement yesterday with criticism of the decision not to mandate masks for primary school children, but otherwise endorsed the reopening.

Gavrielatos declared that the NSWTF “will be closely monitoring the effectiveness of the risk mitigation strategies” implemented by the government. In other words, the union will sit back and watch as thousands of teachers and students become infected with the highly transmissible and deadly virus.

What the unions will be “closely monitoring,” in fact, is the growing opposition among teachers, parents and students to the reckless return to in-person learning.

Teachers responded angrily to the NSWTF statement on the union’s Facebook page. Michael Roberts wrote: “[The] Federation’s lack of support is nothing short of disgraceful. Why must I QR-code when I arrive at school when there is no contact tracing? You have abandoned us, that is simple as that.”

Meredith Peace, Victorian branch president of the Australian Education Union, openly endorsed a plan that will likely kill some of the workers she falsely claims to represent, saying: “The measures outlined by the Andrews Government will help to reduce risk and also focus on the health and safety of staff

and students, while balancing the need to have our students back at school.”

The urgent drive to reopen schools is motivated not by concerns for the education of children, but by the need to force their parents back to their unsafe workplaces, so that full corporate profit-making activities can resume. Prime Minister Scott Morrison declared last week: “If schools aren’t open, we could see the peak furloughing of our workforce go from 10 percent to 15 percent, which would have a devastating effect on our economy.”

Andrews declared that reopening schools was safe because, “we are vaccinated now, we have what we need to prevent, in the vast majority of cases, really serious illness.”

This is an outright lie. Vaccines only became available for children aged 5-11 on January 10. While parents have rushed to have their children inoculated, in line with very high support for COVID-19 vaccines among the broader Australian population, only around one-third of primary school children have received their first shot, and none will be double-dose vaccinated until at least the middle of term one.

This is just one lie among many used to justify the reopening.

Numerous political figures have claimed in recent days that the Omicron wave is close to its peak. This utterly unscientific claim is based on increasingly limited testing, and completely dismisses the impact of policy on transmission. The current surge has taken place almost entirely during the summer holidays, meaning that schools, one of the major sources of transmission during the Delta wave, have so far played little role.

The fact that the return to face-to-face learning will lead to a surge of infections, regardless of “risk mitigation strategies,” is openly acknowledged. Andrews said yesterday: “Once [schools] get back, given how much Omicron is in the community, there will be cases.”

The character of claims that the “peak” has been reached, as an exercise in state propaganda, was bluntly demonstrated by Deputy Prime Minister Barnaby Joyce. He declared on Radio National this morning that there was nothing to worry about because “people are not dying.” Only when challenged by the host did Joyce retract the assertion.

But, undeterred, he continued to downplay the severity of the virus, saying it was a “tragic thing” to lose a family member “for catching the flu.”

Around Australia, 58 COVID-19 deaths were reported today, bringing the total for the first 24 days of 2022 to 922. This accounts for almost a third of all deaths throughout the entire pandemic. More than 5,170 people are hospitalised, 404 are in intensive care, and 139 are on ventilators.

New South Wales (NSW) reported the deaths of 24 people, of which 2 had received three vaccine doses, 16 two doses, 3 one dose, and 3 were unvaccinated. Two of the victims were in their 50s—one had received three vaccine doses and the other had received two. This makes clear that neither vaccine nor relative

youth provides complete protection from COVID-19.

The figures demonstrate that, far from “peaking,” the pandemic has entered its deadliest phase yet in Australia. Having previously claimed that infection numbers were of no significance, governments tout fluctuations in daily case numbers resulting in part from restrictions to testing, as a decisive metric. Before, as they were reopening and allowing the virus to run rampant, they said all that mattered were hospitalisations and deaths. Now that there are record fatalities, figures such as Joyce simply pretend that they are not taking place.

Workers, students and young people must reject the stream of lies. The dangers are not over, schools are not safe and Omicron is not “mild.” Governments are peddling this medical misinformation, despite condemnations from epidemiologists, to justify policies that will result in a further surge of infections, and consequently illness and death.

Above all, it is necessary to draw the political conclusions. All of the governments, Labor and Coalition, and the unions, have demonstrated in practice that their program is corporate profits above health and lives, including those of children.

Urgent action must be taken against the school reopenings, beginning with the formation of rank-and-file action committees at every school, uniting educators, students and parents. This must be part of a broader political struggle by the entire working class against the “let it rip” policies and all of those enforcing them.

Contact the Committee for Public Education to join this fight:
Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com

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