

South Australian teachers vote for strike action against dangerous school reopenings

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Teachers in South Australia (SA) voted by a two-thirds majority yesterday for strike action against the planned resumption of in-person schooling on February 2.

The endorsement of industrial action has thrown the SA executive of the Australian Education Union (AEU) and its national leadership into crisis. The union only called the ballot for fear that widespread anger over the reopening, in the middle of the state's first major COVID surge, could escape its control.

The AEU restricted the vote to a yes or no response to a one-day strike on the first day of term.

But the union is seeking to prevent even this limited action from going ahead. Within hours of the vote, the SA AEU executive announced that it would hold urgent talks this morning, with a view to calling off the strike and reballoting members on the basis of unspecified "progress" in secret backroom talks with the state Liberal government.

The union announced this afternoon a deadline of 10am Thursday for government "undertakings" on expanded COVID testing for teachers, if the strike is to be cancelled.

The vote and the union response has underscored the battle lines in the fight against the reopening of the schools, which is the spearhead of a pro-business drive to force parents and all workers into their workplaces, despite the mass spread of the virus. In every state and territory, the unions are collaborating closely with their respective governments to ensure an orderly return and to neuter widespread hostility.

The SA vote demonstrates that this program is encountering growing opposition. There is little doubt that if a similar ballot were held of teachers in any other state, especially Victoria and New South Wales (NSW), whose respective Labor and Liberal governments are spearheading the national school reopening, there would be a similar result.

A South Australian teacher told the WSWs: "The handling of the return to school has caused concern and anxiety for teachers and families. The mixed message of how dangerous COVID is to our community but how safe staff and students are at school is no longer being accepted. Student learning is

of the utmost priority to all teachers. It is second only to the priority of keeping students safe. Under the current plan, many teachers doubt they can meet either of these priorities."

As in other states, the SA government has said that teachers exposed to the virus can remain in class, but should isolate from their family and the community.

The teacher continued: "The union ballot for strike, as is always the case, comes after the government has refused to respond to members' concerns, with the get-out clause that if concerns are addressed the action will be called off. There are too many details missing and teachers are not fooled by this. Rapid antigen tests [RATs] only help the government keep workers at work, they DO NOT do anything to keep workers safe from COVID infection in the first place.

"The union has said they will negotiate and will work to rectify the ventilation issues at the cost of the government. There is a great deal of skepticism about this. I have never worked in a class with opening windows and we have often been told to lock doors for security reasons. Have those security concerns suddenly disappeared? There are a lot of windows that will need fixing and many buildings don't have any windows that can open at all... The department's refusal to release the air quality audit is only exacerbating teachers' concerns about the department's intentions."

Fearful of opposition, the government announced a staggered return, with years one, seven, eight and 12 beginning on February 2, and all other grades by February 14.

The AEU initially called for the start of term to be delayed by two weeks and asked for the release of audits on the effectiveness of air purifiers, which the government is not mass distributing, and on ventilation.

At no point has the union challenged the basic premise of the reopening or called for online learning.

The union appears to have dropped any suggestion of a postponement of term. In their comments since the ballot, AEU officials have exclusively referenced the issue of RATs being provided en masse to schools. This is a centrepiece of

the reopenings in NSW and Victoria.

In those states, students will be provided with two RATs per week. But this is limited to the first four weeks of term. South Australian Premier Steven Marshall said he had not received health advice that this would be effective. Instead it would “give people a false sense of security,” with many false negative results from the less reliable tests which are to be administered by students themselves and their parents.

The AEU is angling for broader use of RATs, precisely to provide its members with such a false sense of security and to justify calling off the strike, along with the release of the air quality reports, which will do little to protect staff and students.

As the teacher who spoke to the WSWS warned: “I predict that the withholding of the air quality report and air purifiers is tactical and they will be implemented in response to empty threats made by the AEU. This will make the AEU look good and the department will be able to demonstrate to the community that they are indeed responding to raised concerns. Win/win for DfE and the AEU. But not for students or staff.”

The concerns in South Australia are intensified by the fact that the state previously had very limited transmission, in line with the successful suppression of the virus through much of the pandemic in Australia. In the first two years of the COVID crisis, to December 15, there were just 1,031 infections in SA. Since the profit-driven reopening of the border and lifting of safety measures, there have been more than 100,000 in the past six weeks.

That the union felt compelled to call a ballot was likely also the result of the near-rebellion its enterprise agreement encountered in 2020. The AEU-brokered deal provided for real wage cuts and the continuation of existing poor conditions. It was only narrowly ratified by 54 percent with 46 percent of educators voting against.

Whatever the state-based peculiarities, however, the same sentiments are emerging everywhere.

On Sunday, the AEU in Victoria and the NSW Teachers’ Federation gave their stamp of approval to reopening plans in those states, under which there will be no state-organised contact-tracing in schools or closures, even in the event of mass outbreaks. Official modelling reported by the *Guardian* indicates that up to 20 percent of teachers will be off sick at any given time, with the NSW and Victorian governments assembling a replacement workforce of university students and vulnerable retired educators.

On social media, teachers in NSW and Victoria condemned the union complicity in this plan for mass infection. A NSW teacher, for instance, wrote: “What a joke! It’s not as if we don’t know how it is going to go. You just have to look at what is happening in the UK, USA and

Canada where there are next to no mitigations in schools. 20-30% students and teachers’ absent at any one time and mass infection and reinfection of students and teachers.”

Teachers in both states welcomed the SA strike vote. One in NSW posted on social media that the ballot would “hopefully spotlight our situation. I wish all Australian teachers went out on day 1...” Another said: “I think striking is one of the few means left to teachers who want to be heard. not ideal, sure, but how else to communicate in a way that is LISTENED to?”

The unions are demonstrating in practice that they in no way represent teachers. Having imposed regressive enterprise agreements, they are now endorsing reopenings that will likely result in the serious illness and death of some of the workers they claim to represent. This is only the starkest expression of the unions’ role as an industrial and political police force of governments and the corporations, advancing the interests of a privileged bureaucracy.

Teachers must take matters into their own hands, including by establishing rank-and-file committees at all schools. These must fight for the SA strike to proceed and for it to be broadened across the country.

The aim must be to force a return to online learning, as the only means of protecting health and safety, with full compensation for all affected parents and a massive expansion of funding for public education. The fight to protect children and their teachers must be taken up by the working class as a whole, as the spearhead of a broader struggle against the pro-business pandemic program and for scientifically-grounded policies required to eliminate the virus. Contact the Committee for Public Education (CFPE) to take part in this struggle.

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