

COVID disaster set to hit Australia's schools—Build rank and file committees! Prepare strike action to halt infection and death!

The Committee for Public Education (Australia)

25 January 2022

Teachers and school workers are being forced to return to their classrooms Friday in New South Wales and Victoria, the two states worst hit by COVID, with those in other states to follow over the next fortnight.

Federal and state governments, Labor and Liberal, backed by the Australian Education Union and its affiliates, have prepared a program of mass infection, disease, and death. Authorities know full well what is set to emerge, with federal and state chief medical officers admitting in recent days that reopening the schools will trigger clusters of infection and increase overall case numbers.

Media claims that COVID does not affect children, or triple vaccinated adults, are conscious propaganda. In countries with large scale COVID community transmission and open schools, such as the United States and England, children are dying every single day. Countless more are suffering from the debilitating effects of Long COVID, around 10 percent of all those who contract the virus, including chronic fatigue, joint pain, and complex neurological problems.

The Committee for Public Education (CFPE) issues an urgent appeal to all educators, students, parents, and working people—action must be taken prior to the emergence of mass COVID outbreaks in the schools!

This includes taking strike action to force an immediate return to remote learning. The recent vote of two-thirds of teachers in South Australia to strike on the first day of term reflects the enormous unease and hostility among school workers towards being forced back into unsafe classrooms. It also points the way forward—no doubt similar vote results would follow any ballot of teachers in other states.

Educators and students need to follow and join the international movement of school workers that is emerging. In France, teachers took strike action earlier this month and mobilised in mass protests across the country to demand the removal of the hated government of President Emmanuel Macron. Demonstrations have been organised in Greece,

including hundreds of school occupations. In Britain, parents and students have organised weekly boycotts of face to face learning. Across the United States, there have been teacher “sick-outs” and strikes, while multiple cities have also seen mass student walkouts from schools and demonstrations uniting students, teachers, and local communities.

Australian teachers and students must develop the closest bonds of solidarity with these movements.

In every country, the same class issues underlie the political establishment's drive to force open the schools in dangerous conditions. This has nothing to do with a concern for children's learning or mental health—for media outlets and governments these issues are nothing but cynically invoked propaganda points. The real agenda is to ensure that workers remain in their workplaces, continuing to generate profits for big business and finance capital.

This is why lockdowns and other emergency pandemic responses have been repudiated by Labor and Liberal administrations, and why teachers are prohibited from implementing remote learning programs for their students.

None of the so-called “COVID-safe” measures announced before the schools reopen will mitigate the rapid spread of the virus. Only a grossly inadequate number of air filtration systems have been ordered by state governments, not even close to one per classroom. Rapid antigen tests (RATs), which are being provided to staff and students in several states, are unreliable and are being made available primarily to give people a false sense of security in the first weeks of term.

Isolation, quarantining, and contact tracing measures have effectively been abandoned. In Tasmania, for example, those within a classroom are only deemed close contacts if at least five students contract COVID within a week. In New South Wales and Victoria, school operations guides appear to make no provision whatsoever for classifying teachers and students as close contacts based on infections within classrooms. Teachers are among those workers now exempt from usual

quarantining restrictions, meaning they can be forced to continue working, provided they are asymptomatic and pass a RAT, even if they are a close household contact of an infected person.

Authorities anticipate that 20 percent of teachers will be sick with COVID at any given time. A reserve workforce of university students, retirees, and education department bureaucrats has been called up to effectively babysit children while their teachers attempt to recover from the virus.

Within the Australian education system, among the world's most unequal, the impact of the coming COVID surge will be overwhelmingly felt within working class public schools. Elite private institutions—which enjoy lavish annual public subsidies while charging exorbitant tuition fees—have made their own preparations over the summer holiday, no doubt including remote learning options. Within working class schools, on the other hand, there is widespread overcrowding, staff shortages, and dilapidated infrastructure, including limited or zero ventilation within classrooms.

The Australian Education Union (AEU) and its state affiliates remain the primary obstacle to building a movement of teachers and school workers against the criminal return to school agenda.

From the outset of the pandemic, the teacher unions have collaborated with every government diktat, insisting that educators and school workers cannot under any circumstances develop their own independent position on the question of classroom safety and COVID. Union officials also collaborated with governments in suppressing the data on the number of schools affected by COVID outbreaks last year.

The unions are now working to suppress the emergence of organised opposition. In South Australia, the bureaucracy is desperately attempting to subvert the strike vote of teachers through backroom discussions with the state government. In NSW, to take another example, the Teachers Federation leadership has merely said it plans to “closely monitor” the situation when the schools reopen. Union officials have contemptuously ignored the outpouring of hostility with which this statement was met by the hundreds of teachers who spoke out on social media.

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, while outgoing NSW Teachers Federation secretary John Dixon received \$320,000.

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 in every school and the preparation of industrial action to suspend face to face teaching in dangerous conditions.

The CFPE, initiated by members and supporters of 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, the CFPE has mobilised teachers independently of, and in opposition to, the teacher unions.

In this third year of the global pandemic, a rational and scientifically based approach to the virus is more urgent than ever. 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 through the adoption of the necessary measures as advised by leading epidemiologists and scientists.

This will necessarily involve the suspension of both regular schooling and non-essential production. The resources exist to advance such a program—including guaranteed income support to all affected workers and small business owners, and a vast increase in public education spending, including for remote learning infrastructure, additional staffing, and the provision of mental health and other support services for all students and teachers in need. These and other costs must be borne by the largest corporations and a 100 percent tax on the windfall pandemic profits obtained by the ultra-wealthy through the stock market boom.

This all requires the development of a political struggle against the Labor and Liberal state and federal governments, which are prioritising the interests of the financial elite over the health and safety of hundreds of thousands of children and school workers. 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.

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