

Union trying to cancel South Australian teachers' strike against dangerous school reopening

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Since two-thirds of South Australian (SA) teachers voted to strike against the dangerous reopening of schools next week, the Australian Education Union (AEU) has done everything it can to cancel the stoppage and ensure that its members are herded into COVID-infested classrooms as scheduled.

Within hours of the strike ballot closing last Monday, union executives floated the prospect of the stoppage being called off, based on unspecified “progress” in talks with the state Liberal government. The following days involved a flurry of meetings, within the executive and between union officials and the government.

On the basis of these backroom discussions, the AEU suddenly announced last night that it was reballoting members on whether to indefinitely “postpone” the stoppage. Voting began at 8 p.m. and is concluding at 5 p.m. today.

The ballot follows a playbook that has been used repeatedly by the unions over the past several years. When workers deliver a result that goes against the wishes of the union executive, they are compelled to vote again on the exact same issue, sometimes repeatedly, until the ballot goes the opposite way. This could be likened to elections held under a dictatorship, where everyone can cast a vote, but there is only one candidate.

The use of this method is all the more striking, given that the SA AEU is the only education union in the country to have called a vote on action against the reopening of the schools amid the country's worst COVID crisis to date. In the other states, including New South Wales (NSW) and Victoria, where the virus is rampant, the unions are simply functioning as a forwarding service for government dictates that children and teachers return to the classrooms.

The SA AEU was compelled to call the initial ballot because of widespread shock and concern over the COVID surge in that state, which previously had hardly any transmission. The total number of cases has increased from one thousand in the first two years of the COVID crisis, to well over 100,000 in the past six weeks. The union also confronted a near-rebellion in 2020, when it forced through a wage-cutting enterprise agreement in the face of widespread opposition.

The AEU limited the options to a one-day strike on February

2, which would do nothing to prevent their members facing dangerous conditions the next day and each day after.

The union never challenged the premise of reopening schools amid mass COVID transmission, and has not even provided teachers with the opportunity to demand online learning. The AEU backs the government line that schools must be opened, so that parents can be forced into dangerous workplaces and corporate profits made. The union initially called only for a two-week postponement of term, but has dropped that demand.

Even the token 24-hour strike had to be subverted, for fear that it could become the focal point of a broader movement of teachers across the country against the reopenings.

Again, teachers have been told of “progress” in the secret discussions between the AEU bureaucrats and the right-wing state government, but the few details provided by the union to its members indicate that the return to school plan is virtually unchanged.

A bulletin to teachers last night highlighted such “progress” as “Helpline in place to provide advice to employees” and “Letter to parents and further communications being developed for parents with clear expectations regarding children not attending when unwell, mask use etc.”

The union claimed that one of its central demands was for air purification and improved ventilation. The SA government has, it says, agreed to “strategically deploy” 100 air purifiers in the state's 605 public schools. If each school has an average of 30 rooms, for a total of 15,000 classrooms across SA, 0.6 percent would have a purifier. Thousands more are supposedly on their way, but there is no indication of when they will arrive.

There would also be “Site works ongoing to enable increased ventilation, no hold up regarding funding or site works usual procurement processes.” But the schools are reopening next week. Dilapidated classrooms, with a limited number of windows, some of which don't even open, are hardly going to be refurbished in the next four days.

Teachers were particularly hostile to the prospect of being forced to work after having been exposed to the virus, and voiced concern about the dangers to their colleagues with underlying vulnerabilities. The AEU bulletin provides non-

answers to the many questions that educators have raised on these issues.

The government had agreed to “Clear guidelines regarding Close Contact (classroom contact) and isolation requirements.” What they are, no one knows. The government had similarly made the monumental concession of a “Commitment to develop clear definition of ‘vulnerable’” at some point in the unspecified future.

There would be “provision of N95 masks,” but when, where and in what quantity is another unknown.

The union had previously stated that one of its key demands was for the mass use of rapid antigen tests (RATs). This is a centrepiece of the NSW and Victorian reopenings. The self-administered use of these less reliable tests, by students and their parents, is designed to provide a veneer of safety where there is none.

It is nevertheless noteworthy that even on this question, which was supposedly of such concern to the AEU officials a few days ago, the union has capitulated. RATs will only be “trialled for ‘test to stay’ in special settings and discussions continue re extending this trial to other vulnerable cohorts.” At most schools, RATs will reportedly only be used after a positive case is detected. How such infections are to be identified, in the absence of testing, is unclear. Asymptomatic cases especially will simply be missed.

Even the AEU “highlights” give an inkling of the conditions the union is preparing to enforce. Substitute teachers will be “engaged on contract in regions/hubs to assist with staff shortages.”

And: “Regarding the need to utilise sick leave when contracting COVID, on a case-by-case basis, the Department is open to discussing individual circumstances where employees don’t have remaining sick leave.” Hardly great reassurance.

These provisions indicate that as in NSW and Victoria, the SA authorities and the union know there will be mass transmission in the schools. In the former two states, official modelling has indicated that up to 20 percent of teachers could be off sick at any one time.

Mehring Books, the publishing arm of the Socialist Equality Party (US), is proud to announce the publication in epub format of Volume 1 of *COVID, Capitalism, and Class War: A Social and Political Chronology of the Pandemic*, a compilation of the *World Socialist Web Site's* coverage of this global crisis.

In comments to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, SA AEU branch president Andrew Gohl said: “Are we getting everything we want to see here? No, we’re not, but at some point you’ve got to be realistic about this.” The “progress,” Gohl stated, was that “conversations are happening in a positive way with the department, with the commitment for that to continue...”

The bulletin ended on a similarly pathetic and self-damning note. “It is a fact that there is nothing that can be done to totally protect education workers and students against COVID ” in

schools, the AEU stated, ignoring the fact that online education would do precisely this.

“Ultimately, the Premier’s intransigence to push back the start of the school year by two weeks has created a situation where many of the issues raised by members have not been resolved because of the short timelines,” the union officials wrote.

In his “intransigence,” the premier confronted a union that would not even back a one-day strike overwhelmingly endorsed by its membership. It could never be accused of “intransigence,” except in defying the demands of teachers.

All of which meant, “The reality will be that many of the unresolved issues will have to be addressed at the local level.” But rest assured, the AEU would provide future “advice” in the form of similar bulletins. The union may as well have concluded by declaring: “You’re on your own!”

Such is the role of all of the education unions. Their privileged executives collaborate hand-in-glove with governments and education departments as they implement policies that will likely kill some of the teachers the AEU claims to represent. But despite the immense dangers, teachers must be “realistic.”

Teachers in SA who have not yet voted should reject the strike cancellation with the contempt it deserves.

But broader conclusions must be drawn. The experiences of the past week have shown that the unions are determined to stifle even the most limited action in defense of health, safety and lives.

This demonstrates that the fight for a return to online learning, the only means of protecting teachers and children while the virus is circulating, requires a rebellion against the AEU. Independent rank-and-file committees are needed to take up a fight against the reopening. This must include the demand for full income support for parents affected by online learning and a massive expansion of funding for public education.

The fight against the school reopenings should be the spearhead of a broader movement of the working class, demanding a repudiation of the “let it rip” pandemic policies and a scientifically-grounded program to eliminate the virus.



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