

Australian university union tries to stifle opposition to unsafe campus reopenings

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After months of silence throughout the devastating Delta and Omicron waves of the COVID-19 pandemic, Australia's main university trade union is trying to block any fight by staff and students against the dangerous reopening of campuses.

This is under conditions in which the country's federal, state and territory governments, Labor and Liberal-National alike, are imposing a "live with the virus" program of mass infection, disease and death.

For all the false government and media claims that the Omicron variant is "mild," has "peaked," or will somehow end the pandemic, its unfettered transmission in Australia and globally is creating the conditions for new, possibly vaccine-resistant mutations, as well as serious dangers of Long COVID.

Most immediately, Australia's spiralling COVID-19 death toll—already over 1,000 this month—is about to be accelerated by the reopening of primary and secondary schools, which is being carried out solely to ensure that parents are fully returned to their workplaces for the sake of corporate profit.

As has already been seen in universities across the US, cramming students into classrooms and other campus venues, such as libraries, will produce super-spreader events, resulting in more deaths and suffering.

Universities, like schools, are proven vectors for transmission and community spread. A study of over 30 US colleges found that at least half reported infection spikes of 1,000 COVID-19 cases per 100,000 people within the first two weeks of classes.

Last month, Cornell University was forced to go remote after nearly 1,000 student infections occurred in just four days, despite more than 97 percent of the students being vaccinated.

Far from opposing the "return to campus" drive by the governments and university managements, the

National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) is joining other unions in appealing to employers to develop "risk assessment and mitigation plans" to justify this program.

NTEU members received emails this week saying the union was part of an emergency national meeting of union leaders last week and "we strongly support the outcomes of that meeting."

That gathering, convened by the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU), had nothing to do with protecting the safety of workers. The unions will continue to help dragoon workers into workplaces, despite raging infections, as they have throughout the pandemic.

The aim of the ACTU meeting was to put on a show of concern, cover up the culpability of the unions for workplace transmissions and prevent the eruption of action by workers outside the unions' control.

At the end of last year, the NTEU blocked all discussion on the unsafe COVID conditions at meetings it called to discuss new enterprise agreements with the employers, claiming the pandemic danger was not related to the bargaining talks.

Now it is asking for consultations with management to draft "risk assessments." These talks will seek to defuse anger over the unsafe conditions and deepen the collaboration between unions and highly-paid university executives.

The only other NTEU requests are for N95 or equivalent masks and rapid antigen tests for employees "who are required to work on campus" and for buildings to be "appropriately ventilated with occupancy limits." That language is deliberately vague.

Rapid tests are unreliable, virtually impossible to obtain, and do not prevent infection in the first place. Such union calls for rapid tests dovetail with business

demands for the use of such tests to get ill or isolating workers quickly back on the job.

To forestall demands by university workers and students for action, the NTEU said: “In the coming days we will be writing to each university calling on them to continue or immediately begin the consultation on appropriate Omicron risk plans that they are required by law to undertake.”

But many university managements have already reopened campuses and resumed face-to-face classes, or announced their intention to do so. That includes Victoria University, where summer courses are being conducted on-site, Monash University, the University of Melbourne, the University of NSW and the University of Queensland. At Western Sydney University, the management has told staff that it does not expect any significant changes to its return to campus plan for the start of the Autumn session, despite an increase in infections at the university.

International students are being flown into the country, offered visa fee refunds and allowed to work full-time, with uncapped hours, in order to “reactivate” campuses, boost corporate revenue, shore up university finances and exploit them as cheap labour in industries such as aged care, fruit picking and hospitality.

The NTEU will do everything it can to prevent industrial action that could halt these plans. To try to give itself some credibility in the eyes of workers, the ACTU last week said stoppages could occur, but only if businesses failed to provide risk statements. The NTEU avoided even making that token threat, despite walkouts being lawful on health and safety grounds under the anti-strike Fair Work laws drawn up by the unions and the last federal Labor government.

The NTEU, like the other education unions, fears the development and spread of opposition among educators. This week, teachers in South Australia gave a lead. They voted by a two-thirds majority to strike against the planned resumption of in-person classes next week. But the Australian Education Union, well aware that teachers around the country are equally hostile to the unsafe return, is working to stop the strike from going ahead in collaboration with the state Liberal government.

Members of the Committee for Public Education (CFPE) and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), both initiated by the Socialist

Equality Party, are urging all university workers and students to oppose any return to campus during the Omicron disaster and to fight for joint strikes and walkouts to force an immediate return to remote learning, in order to prevent mass COVID outbreaks.

Staff and students should form rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions, and link up with the international movement that is emerging, including strikes, student walkouts and protests in France, Greece, Britain, Canada and the United States. Last week, University of Oregon graduate workers walked out to demand an immediate return to remote learning.

Such a movement is needed to end the pandemic and save lives, fighting for a shutdown of non-essential production, with full compensation for workers, and online learning for the schools and universities. These policies have to be part of a broader struggle in Australia and internationally for the elimination of the virus and for a socialist perspective, aimed at reorganising society to meet the needs of working people, not the profit demands of the financial elite.



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