

“I feel like I’m having to choose between my education and my family’s safety”

Growing student opposition to reopening of Australian universities amid COVID surge

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Students at universities around Australia are beginning to voice their anger at the profit-driven plans to force students back into crowded lecture theatres and classrooms amid mass infection and death due to COVID-19. Universities plan to reopen this month, and early next, despite tens of thousands of infections and dozens of deaths being recorded every day.

Several, including the University of Melbourne, La Trobe University and the University of Sydney have announced a “blended” model where students have the “option” to attend certain classes online.

Other universities are pressing ahead with a full return to campus.

In the state of New South Wales (NSW), Western Sydney University and the University of New South Wales are preparing full reopenings, as is Victoria’s Monash University.

The drive to force students and staff into unsafe campuses is proceeding with the support of the trade unions, including the student unions and National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU), which covers university staff.

NTEU Assistant National Secretary Gabe Gooding confirmed the union’s cooperation in the return to campus, writing last November—when daily COVID case numbers nationally were over 1,000 and rising—in the union’s magazine, *Advocate*: “This period as we transition out of lockdowns is the point where we must seize the moment and ensure that we don’t ‘transition back,’ but instead ‘transition forward.’”

Amid a massive backlash from staff and students to the reopening plans, Monash University was hit last Friday with a Provisional Improvement Notice (PIN) issued by a Monash Health and Safety Representative under state legislation. According to the NTEU, the PIN directs the university “to cease work on return to on-site work and face-to-face teaching until genuine consultation has been carried out.”

The union only took the limited action of backing the PIN, for fear that widespread hostility among students and staff threatened to escape its control.

Now, the union is attempting to divert this anger behind

feckless appeals to management, and half measures that will not protect health and safety.

In a press release, the NTEU Monash branch bemoaned the fact that the union was not adequately consulted in planning. Its “demands” included the provision of N95/KN94 masks and Rapid Antigen Tests (RATs) for staff—not for students. The union also called for “online teaching to remain an *option* for all students and staff.” All of this is compatible with the reopening drive of management.

Online comments on the NTEU Monash press release indicate the sentiments of students and staff. One science student wrote: “In semester 1 2021, domestic students got the option to choose whether to do each class online or in person. This was when there were no cases. It is ridiculous that we no longer get the opportunity to, while covid is running rampant through the state. I shouldn’t have to choose between continuing my uni degree and seeing family/friends who are immunocompromised.”

Another commenter wrote: “No one should get covid at work. It’s not mild, and we are not all going to get it. It’s a serious multi system disease. The University must prevent transmission at work.”

A nursing student at Monash University said: “We requested that online learning continue this semester—we got a similar response from the uni saying that they’re improving ventilation so it’s OK to return to campus. Absolutely disgusted with this response as it feels they are doing nothing and are ignoring our safety in spite of a very clear request to not resume face to face teaching.”

Almost 200 Monash University nursing students have signed a powerful petition started by nursing masters students opposing the return to in-person teaching. The petition states that students “are highly concerned by the current plans to return to 100% on-campus delivery of our course. The plan to return to campus was made before the Omicron variant was detected internationally, or in our community. We believe that continuing with this plan despite the new situation would pose

unnecessary risks to our patients, ourselves, and disruption to our studies from illness.

“We understand that Monash is currently following Victorian government guidance requirements in its COVID Safe Plan. We do not believe that these minimum requirements are sufficient to provide a safe learning environment, or one that is appropriate for us while we complete hospital placements with vulnerable populations.

“We do not plan to attend campus for in-person learning that we consider unnecessary, and which has been proven through the last year of online learning to be unnecessary. While we look forward to joining the ranks of the nursing workforce that is in such urgent need of replenishment at the moment, we do not consider it reasonable that we are asked to expose ourselves to unnecessary risks in the classroom to get there.”

The petition calls for “Lectures and workshops to continue in online mode” and “surgical masks provided in lab classes to be replaced with N95 masks.”

The Monash Law Students’ Society reported on Facebook that the Law Faculty confirmed classes would resume in person with no option to watch lectures online.

Students in the Facebook group expressed their opposition to the decision. One wrote: “Now, when Omicron is at its peak they expect us to jump straight back into classrooms for record-length classes with no option to watch recordings. And you bet they will turn around and say ‘in-person learning has been proven to be more effective’ as if that’s not a massive backflip on what they’ve been saying for the past 2 years.”

Another said: “I’m quite concerned about this... My grandma rooms with me and I live in a 7-person household where none of us have our own bedrooms to isolate, and so I’ve been quite cautious due to the recent wave and have stayed at home most of the time during the holidays.

“I find that the change from 1.5[-hour] lectures and online options to an extended 3-hour unrecorded in-person seminar to be quite the opposite of ‘safe’ for us students and the lecturers themselves. It’s really ironic that some of us have taken such drastic measures to protect ourselves and our families just to be forced to attend classes to pass when previously it has been clear that online classes have worked for us.”

The student continued: “I know that if I’m there, it’s not by choice and all I’ll be doing is agonizing over when I can leave and when I’ll be bringing my new friend Covid home to my family.”

Another responded: “My grandmother has just finished her chemotherapy and I have care requirements for her. She is highly immunocompromised, and I have been so careful these last two years. It feels like the uni just doesn’t give a f..k about people’s personal situations. I feel like I’m having to choose between my education and my family’s safety.”

At Western Sydney University (WSU), Vice Chancellor Barney Glover sent a mass email on Friday in which he claimed the university has “been reassured in recent days by the more

positive news from NSW Health about case numbers and hospitalisations.” Glover continued: “The University will resume face-to-face teaching on campus, and libraries will operate under normal opening hours.”

A WSU student commented in a Facebook group: “I’ve asked two of the coordinators for two of my units if there’s any online options and they both said the Dean of the respective field said no as the university is trying to get as many things back to on campus as possible—I think it’s pretty bad for students who are immunocompromised that there’s not even an option for some units to zoom in.”

Students are being force-fed the lie that the return to campus is done with their mental health and education in mind. This could not be further from the truth.

Universities and schools across the country are being reopened as part of the murderous “let it rip” policies of governments around the world. For the ruling financial elite, reopening schools and universities to face-to-face teaching is an integral part of ensuring workers go back to work to continue producing profits for the corporate elite. The unscientific claims that the Sars-Cov-2 virus will become “endemic” and the lie that young people are posed with minimal risks from COVID-19 have been used as justification for this pro-business drive.

In addition to the academic unions, this campaign is backed by the students unions, which have not only failed to mobilise against the reopening, but in most cases have not even said anything about it.

Pointing the way forward, students and teachers in France, across the US, and in Greece are protesting the deadly return to face-to-face teaching. Students must unite with university workers and form rank-and-file committees—completely separate from the pro-business trade unions—to take forward the struggle against this homicidal reopening and the demand for the full closure of campuses and transition to online learning to protect students and staff.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE)—the youth and student arm of the Socialist Equality Party—explains that this fight requires an international struggle of young people and the working class against the murderous capitalist response to the pandemic. The aim must be the elimination of COVID and the protection of health and lives. Contact the IYSSE to get involved.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact