

Australian educator speaks to Global Workers' Inquest: "The biggest lie was that kids didn't get COVID, did not transmit it, and then if they did become infected it was mild."

Sue Phillips
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Amanda has been a primary school teacher for more than 20 years, living in Melbourne, the capital city of Victoria, Australia's second populous state.

The *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) spoke to Amanda about her experiences over the past two and half years under conditions of lockdowns, remote learning and COVID spreading throughout the schools with the full complicity of the teacher unions. Amanda became active in the Committee for Public Education (CFPE), a rank-and-file educator, parent and student group, at the beginning of the pandemic after being victimised at her school for speaking in defence of educator and student health and safety.

Amanda, who is using a pseudonym, provided this interview as testimony to the Global Workers' Inquest into the COVID-19 Pandemic, initiated by the WSWS to break through the cover-up, falsifications, and misinformation that have been deployed to justify policies responsible for the avoidable deaths of millions since the initial detection of SARS-CoV-2.

Sue Phillips: Can you describe what it was like in the schools at the beginning of the pandemic in 2020?

Amanda: We were hearing lots of information coming out from other countries where people were getting infected with COVID and dying.

I felt extremely unsafe in school. Here in Victoria, teachers were discussing the possibility of school closures, organising petitions and passing resolutions demanding the union and the government do something. They initially did nothing.

There was not even enough soap in bathrooms, let alone classrooms, to practice the suggested hygiene practices. Infection controls are always difficult in schools. The advice in the early days was to practice hand hygiene, to wipe down tables and try to keep social distancing—1.5 metres apart from each other. This is impossible in a classroom with young kids.

The Committee for Public Education put out a statement in March, very early on, calling for the closure of schools. They were informing the public of the situation in other countries and using scientific evidence to back the need for the closure of schools, for mitigations to be in place and for a zero COVID policy.

The government was putting out mixed messages, confusion and at worst gaslighting, preventing people from understanding the real risks.

SP: In March 2020 you spoke at a staff meeting raising concerns about COVID and the situation in schools. What was the response?

A: We initially called a union meeting and discussed the possibility of

closing schools following what was happening internationally.

Our principal called a staff meeting and I felt compelled to represent the view of the staff at our school. I asked what measures would be put in place. I was worried about teacher anxiety, which was growing.

I raised that schools have a duty of care to staff and students, and that I was extremely worried about everyone's well-being.

My concern was met with anger by the principal, and I was told I was wrong and that I had no right to speak. All we could do was follow the Department guidelines and we should not question anything.

One of the young teachers who was pregnant spoke, saying there was no soap in her classroom. She was abruptly told to bring her own soap from home and request reimbursement at the office. I was shocked at the principal's response. Everything was being left to each individual to protect themselves.

I remember commenting that no matter what the Department guidelines were, we should always go above and beyond to take care of the people in our school. I was yelled at, pointed at and told I was wrong to speak. It was horrible.

My comments were very mild mannered and more than anything I was worried about staff anxiety. After the meeting staff came up to me saying "that was brutal." They supported what I said and they thanked me for standing up and speaking. Several sent me SMS and emails of support overnight. Most teachers feared speaking out and being targeted.

The next morning the principal walked into my classroom before school and began verbally attacking me. She said again that I had no right to question her or the department. She basically said she is the boss and that I was to do what she told me to do.

I felt threatened and even after I asked her to leave many times, she continued to harass me. The intimidation only stopped when another staff member walked into the room and saw I was having a panic attack and could hardly breathe. The whole experience was traumatising and later resulted in me needing to go on WorkCover [medical] leave.

Eventually, I had to leave my workplace and got a job at another school—all because I stood up for my fellow staff members and was being bullied and victimised by the principal.

SP: What was the response of the union to your victimisation?

A: The AEU [Australian Education Union] was extremely unhelpful, to say the least. They said if I was going to put in a complaint to the Department, I should first move to another school, otherwise I could be further victimised.

The only support the union offered was to read through my complaint, suggest the complaint be kept simple with dot points. That's it, absolutely no support at all.

The support I received was from CFPE members. I wrote a lengthy report and complaint to the regional director and collected many pieces of evidence to support my claim and sent it to the Department, which received it in early 2020.

I basically received no response for nearly a year. The only replies were initiated by me and all they would say was "we are looking into it to decide whether it was worth investigating."

What an extraordinary situation. First, they had to decide whether it was worth an investigation, leaving me in limbo, hoping that I would just disappear. This is despite the pages and pages of evidence that I collected and presented to back my claim.

I believe I proved without a doubt that I had been victimised. Despite the experience having enormous impact on my mental well-being, I was determined not to drop the case.

Apart from this particular experience, I had been targeted by the principal along with other teachers at the school who were a part of the school branch AEU executive. We asked for support from the central AEU over a number of issues and received nothing, except to say that we were doing a great job standing up for our members.

This experience took an incredible toll on me and any illusions that I had left about the union were well and truly quashed during this time. It highlighted the fact that unions were not representative of their members, but instead were a force to keep the teachers in check. This has been proved again and again throughout the pandemic.

SP: From the beginning of COVID, the state Labor government claimed that social distancing in schools was unnecessary. What did you think about that?

A: Well initially they spoke about socially distancing, but quickly realised that this was impossible in schools with large class sizes. Then they brought forward some pseudo-science that it wasn't necessary and kids didn't get COVID. The government's aim was to keep schools open no matter what. The initial mitigations in schools denied that COVID was airborne. Supposedly wiping down tables and washing hands was enough.

At the time, I was teaching a younger primary grade of 5–6-year-olds and it was impossible to keep them apart. Initially I remember being told not to touch the kids, not to give them a cuddle if they were feeling hurt and that we should try and keep our distance. This is not the reality of a primary classroom.

Concerns were raised on social media about the misinformation that schools were safe and jokes were being made that COVID ridiculously stops at the front door of a school. The government had no regard for the health of teachers and students. My only function was to keep the kids in school despite the risks to my health, family, elderly parents and friends and colleagues.

The analogy of being the canary in the coal mine was ringing true in our classrooms, it was horrible. The biggest lie was that kids didn't get COVID, did not transmit it, and then if they did become infected it was mild.

SP: Premier Daniel Andrews' state Labor government initially carried out a number of lockdowns and Victoria was described by the media as the "lockdown capital of the world." What did you think?

A: No one enjoyed the long lockdowns, however, I was relieved when the first one was finally called. It was extremely hard moving from regular delivery in the classroom to remote learning but teachers were incredibly resilient and extremely successful in doing so.

It was only a matter of days that teachers were able to provide this service to the kids. In contrast, the parliament stopped meeting because it was considered too hard for the politicians to do it remotely.

Meanwhile teachers were able to facilitate learning for groups of 25 to

30 five-year-olds. Was it difficult, absolutely! Was it the right thing to do? Yes, it was safe.

It meant that we could continue working, that our students could continue learning and we no longer had to endure the pressures of working in a petri dish that was our classrooms.

The lockdowns were a part of a suppression strategy in Victoria. The discussion was around flattening the curve, it was not about COVID zero. However, it was so successful that we did reach COVID zero at least twice. It was proved it was possible. We saved countless lives by doing so.

We were watching the hundreds and hundreds of deaths occurring in the US and the UK, India and endless numbers of other countries, while we were enjoying relative freedom from death and illness.

At the same time, we were locked down, other states such as New South Wales (NSW) and the federal government were dangerously lifting health restrictions undermining a suppression approach. This was being demanded by government, business and the Murdoch media.

[Ex-Prime Minister Scott] Morrison was calling for the economy to be opened up, and for Victoria to end its lockdowns and send us back into unsafe schools for the sake of the economy. While I didn't agree with everything the state government was doing, I was certainly happy to be in a state that, at that time, seemed to be making health a priority.

When NSW, the adjoining state to us, decided to open up and "live with COVID," the pressure was to do the same here. People were inundated with advice that we were better off living with COVID. The government started excepting hundreds of cases that turned into hundreds of deaths, and then the schools opened. The Education Department made clear there would be no more school closures.

In the schools we had to deal with infection after infection and were expected to soldier on. This is under conditions where schools have been proven time and time again to be the largest, by far, transmitters of COVID. And we are expected to just go along with it to provide babysitting so the parents could be forced back into workplaces.

SP: How would you describe the role of the teacher unions?

A: The AEU has been on board with the governments throughout. They refused to gather data, to report on COVID in schools or even to have a genuine and open discussion during union meetings. When asked to report data, they said they wouldn't because they were too busy on other issues. I thought that was abhorrent!

All the advice that came from the teacher unions was directly from the government. When schools were reopened, despite transmission still occurring, Meredith Peace the state president of the AEU put out a statement welcoming this. As usual it was all about implementing government priorities.

Online union meetings became so anti-democratic. Members, including myself, were unable to speak. At some meetings questions could not be stated directly to the union; they had to be typed in and sent to an outside platform and were filtered by union officials. Questions were either brushed over or simply ignored.

CFPE members who asked questions were threatened to be removed from meetings. At one meeting, a CFPE teacher was threatened with "disorderly conduct" and to be removed from the meeting if they posted a question in the chat outside of the COVID-19 agenda item. I was personally shut down too when I gave my opinion about COVID in schools.

The AEU has even blocked members from commenting on its Facebook page. On several occasions our messages have been deleted. When I asked why members could not comment on matters such as COVID, members were accused of being trolls affecting their page. This was a lie.

SP: During the last term in 2021 you were involved in gathering data on COVID infections in the schools initiated by the CFPE. Why?

A: During Term 3, 2021, CFPE members noticed that more and more

schools were being closed due to infections, yet this was not being reported by the media or unions. The extent of the pandemic was being covered up.

We thought this was important information that parents needed in order to decide for themselves whether it was safe to send kids to school.

I began looking at the Education Departments website every day and I recorded the number of schools that were closed each day. Even with minimal kids at school, more and more schools were experiencing infections and were being closed down. We started posting these numbers on the CFPE Facebook.

Very quickly people were noticing, commenting and sharing our figures and it became extremely obvious that this information was needed. We even began compiling data on school clusters that were growing. To further suppress the reality, the Department continued to change its rules.

Schools were staying open despite infections. Instead, only cohorts or the levels were being sent home. This was not reported on the Department's website, so finding schools affected became harder and harder.

We put out a survey to parents and teachers to report to us cases in their schools. We understood that our data was an underestimation of the real situation but it nevertheless became a focus as the real situation was not being reported.

Toward the end of the term, most of our data was collected independently, with additional information from COVID-19 community websites that listed significant outbreaks. Official data showed that schools were the biggest spreaders of the virus, more than any other industry.

The media was silent until our data became noticed. Only then did the media briefly report on school infections. Throughout, hurdles have been put up to deliberately bury the situation. Information was so important, and parents and teachers appreciated our work.

SP: You are working in a primary school in a Melbourne working-class suburb with a high number of immigrant and refugee families. What has been the impact of COVID in the school community?

A: When we had lockdowns, kids were home and for some families this was very difficult as many parents did not have jobs or income where they could stay home. In 2021, schools endured partial lockdowns over several weeks.

Having insecure employment, COVID "fatigue" as it was described, and a lack of full financial support from the government made the uncertainty of this extremely hard for already disadvantaged families.

While some private schools were able to offer a choice of remote learning, public schools such as my own were not always afforded the same right.

Toward the end of 2021, infections were increasing in our school. The policy of "living with the virus" meant that schools were basically not to close or go to remote learning. This was a government directive. Schools were meant to pretend that everything was back to normal. School camps went ahead, school performances, end of year concerts.

In the final weeks of the term, we had something like 100 cases at my school. Our principal pleaded with the Education Department to close as the danger was very real for our students, staff and families. The workload for our administration staff was unbearable as they were at that time expected to contact trace, inform families of shut down classrooms and complete paperwork for the department for every single case.

The department refused to close us down. Families were informed only when their classroom was affected. The exact numbers of cases were never reported. It was only by chance that I was privy to the number of actual cases there were.

It was only when a staff member contracted COVID and had attended a staff function, with the probability of all staff infected, that the department decided we would be closed. This was the second last day of the school

year.

Even now during 2022, with COVID surging, we are not allowed to close. Masks are "encouraged" but no longer mandated, students are not eligible for booster vaccinations, new variants are spreading, and we are reaching the highest number of new cases and deaths, per capita anywhere in the world.

The messaging that we must "live with the virus" is so strong that very few teachers or students are wearing masks, and ventilation measures are not being followed. I understand the dangers. I wear a mask and ventilate my room all the time, but others don't seem to understand the risks and I am left to work in an extremely unsafe environment.

Apart from the many and varied problems in public schools right now, COVID is so to speak the icing on the cake. At least five staff have left the school since the beginning of the year with several others considering doing the same.

It's terrible to be in a position where you don't feel you can continue in your job and feel so sad for the students who will be left behind. COVID didn't cause the problems in disadvantaged schools like mine, but it certainly has highlighted the issues and has exacerbated them. The catastrophe in public schools is continuing apace.

SP: What do you think about the fight for a COVID elimination perspective?

A: The WSWS and CFPE perspective has been extremely important and accurate from the very beginning. While governments and mainstream media have run misinformation campaigns, deliberately backing the corrupt capitalist governments across Australia and the world at the expense of the working class, only the WSWS has maintained scientifically proven, factual information from around the world. Our suppression strategy here in Australia proved almost by accident that COVID zero was possible.

However, it was also proven that a state or country alone could not maintain COVID zero alone. Elimination of COVID-19 cannot be done, as the WSWS has highlighted, in only one country. It cannot be done on a capitalist backdrop where financing the rich is more important than public health. The pandemic has highlighted the crisis of capitalism.

Not only do we need a worldwide strategy to combat COVID-19, the same is true for all worldwide disasters, including war, climate change and the inequity between rich and poor.

The WSWS is the only organisation claiming this and backing it up with scientific research. Its affiliated political parties such as the Socialist Equality Party here in Australia are the only parties offering an alternative to the devastating effects of COVID-19 and capitalism in general.

I fully support this perspective to end COVID-19 once and for all. I'm sick of hearing that it's getting harder and harder to do this as the issues intensify. I believe the scientists quoted by the WSWS who say that it would only take a few months if a concerted worldwide effort was put into elimination.

Vaccines need to be produced, not for profit but for health, and the working class needs to be supported financially to stay home while there is community transmission of COVID.

All students should have access to remote learning, and all this should be funded through the profits of the financial elite, who made outrageous and unprecedented fortunes during the pandemic.

For discussion contact the Committee for Public Education (CFPE)

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