

Oppose the ending of COVID-positive isolation requirements in Australia! Unite educators and health workers to fight for safety and lives above profit!

Health Workers Rank-and-File Committee, Committee for Public Education
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The Health Workers Rank-and-File Committee (HWRFC) and the Committee for Public Education (CFPE) call on all workers to oppose the lifting of isolation requirements for COVID-positive individuals, which comes into effect today.

The ending of COVID isolation, and the abolition of most pandemic leave payments for infected workers, is a declaration of war against public health and working people.

The “let it rip” policies, adopted by all of Australia’s governments last December, have already claimed more than 13,000 lives and have caused at least ten million infections. Tens of thousands of people have lost a loved one to a horrific, but preventable illness. Hundreds of thousands, or even millions, face the prospect of debilitating Long COVID and other potentially life-long medical conditions.

Now, the governments are taking this criminal, profits before lives policy to a new level, even as the virus kills hundreds of people every month and August was Australia’s deadliest month of the entire pandemic. With the end of COVID isolation, they are decreeing a “forever pandemic,” allowing the virus to circulate everywhere and forcing sick workers to stay on the job. As is the case internationally, nothing is allowed to get in the way of the profits and production of the major corporations. The immunocompromised and elderly are considered dispensable.

There is a direct relationship between the dire situation facing educators and health workers, both of whom are on the pandemic frontlines.

The spearhead of the “let it rip” campaign has been the reopening of schools to face-to-face learning. This has nothing to do with concern for children’s education but is to ensure that parents are forced into workplaces and factories, so businesses continue to reap profits. Any family with school-aged children knows that the schools are vectors for the spread of the virus, placing children, their parents and grandparents at risk. Teachers dedicated to the education of their students face every day the threat of contracting a virus that can render them seriously ill or worse.

Health workers, who function in a hospital system starved of funds, staff and resources, must deal with the consequences of this homicidal policy.

These conditions are now set to worsen, with the virus being allowed to spread even more freely. The imposition of this program has taken the form of a conspiracy against the population. The ending of isolation, like all other attacks on public health measures, was worked out behind closed doors in the extra-constitutional National Cabinet.

Labor and the Liberal-Nationals are on a unity ticket against health and lives, with the federal Albanese government implementing attacks that the previous Morrison administration could not, and state Labor premiers, such as Daniel Andrews, collaborating on a daily basis with New South

Wales Premier Dominic Perrottet and other Coalition leaders.

There is widespread opposition among workers to this “herd immunity” program. But it is ignored by the official parties and the media. They can only get away with this, however, because of the role of the corporatised trade unions, which are the chief enforcers of the “let it rip” program, just as they play the key role in enforcing attacks on pay and conditions.

Their position was summed up by Gerard Hayes, the state secretary of the Health Services Union. He did not simply go along with the government line. Hayes was actively campaigning for the ending of the isolation requirements, before the measure was announced. His concern was the impact of the isolation mandate on the “economy,” that is on business profits.

In education, it is the unions that have repeatedly herded teachers and students back into classrooms and schools that are the scene of daily super-spreading events.

This union-government-business conspiracy cannot go unchallenged! It must be fought by the entire working class, as part of the fight for workplace safety, wage increases greater than inflation and drastic improvements to ever-worsening conditions.

A crucial first step to building such a movement of the working class is uniting healthcare and education workers in a common struggle against the ending of the isolation mandate. We are on the front lines of this offensive and have to take a stand!

Already, there are reports of principals instructing parents to send their children to school, even if they test positive to COVID-19 and have mild symptoms. Teachers and education staff are facing the nightmarish scenario of being trapped in a closed room, with maskless children who are known to be carrying a potentially deadly virus. This is a policy that will not only lead to a major surge of the pandemic, and widespread infection and illness. It will claim teachers’ lives.

In healthcare, the hospitals are already continuously overwhelmed. There are not enough nurses to meet demand, nor hospital beds for the sick. By every metric, from waiting times in emergency departments, to delayed medical assistance and excess deaths, the healthcare system is in its greatest crisis of the past eighty years. For nurses and other staff, double shifts are increasingly the norm, and burnout is rampant. Governments and the unions are now preparing a new and even deadlier surge of the virus that will threaten to overwhelm the hospitals entirely.

The HWRFC and the CFPE are rank-and-file groups of healthcare workers and educators fighting for our social rights against the corporations, the governments and their union enforcers. We call on workers to establish rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions, in the schools, hospitals and other medical workplaces, to begin a unified

campaign against this new stage of the “let it rip” offensive.

Through rank-and-file committees workers can begin to share information that is being suppressed and covered-up by governments and the unions. How many health workers and educators have had to leave the industry as a consequence of a COVID infection? How many nurses have died from the coronavirus? How many teachers have fallen seriously ill or passed away?

The governments and the unions know, but they keep the information hidden for fear of the opposition of workers if they learn the truth.

In addition to serving as an information network, controlled by workers themselves, rank-and-file committees are the vehicle for defending workers and medical experts who are victimised for opposing the “let it rip” offensive.

That includes the untold number of teachers, whose concerns about infection have been brushed aside by education departments and the unions. It also includes principled medical experts such as Dr David Berger, a widely-respected general practitioner, who has been sanctioned and threatened with deregistration by the medical authorities for vocally opposing the COVID-everywhere program and for telling the truth about the virus.

Above all, rank-and-file committees are fighting organisations. They can convene meetings, where workers can discuss the issues they face and the way forward, free from the interference and censorship of union bureaucrats. A network of such committees can serve as the organising centre for concrete actions aimed at advancing workers’ interests, including unified protests and strikes by health and education workers.

The struggle of such committees can encompass all of the issues workers confront. The pandemic has been used by governments and the employers to transfer vast sums of public wealth to the financial elite and to intensify the onslaught on workers’ jobs, wages and conditions.

The calamity that the “let it rip” program has produced in education and healthcare comes on top of already difficult conditions in both sectors, resulting from decades of government funding cuts and one union sell-out agreement after another.

Now, as they unleash mass infection and illness, the ruling elite and its representatives are deepening their assault on pay and conditions. The industrial agreement covering Victorian teachers, forced through by the Australian Education Union (AEU) earlier this year in the face of mass opposition, is a warning of the agenda everywhere. The AEU sell-out contains pay “increases” of less than two percent a year, under conditions where official inflation is more than seven percent and the real increase in the cost of living is far higher.

This is the blueprint for every other Australian state and territory, as the federal Labor government oversees a global agenda of wage-cutting, interest rate hikes and budget austerity, to make the working class pay for the deepening economic crisis.

There is mass opposition and anger. In NSW, nurses and teachers have been in a protracted fight against regressive industrial agreements, taking their first strike action in over a decade. But the unions are limiting action, keeping workers divided and seeking to transform the disputes into an election campaign for the state Labor opposition, which has an identical position to the Liberal-National government on pay cuts, effective budget freezes and mass COVID infection.

The lesson of these experiences is that anger and opposition are not enough. Workers need their own organisations, independent of and in opposition to the trade unions, which have been transformed into agencies of governments and the employers, serving the interests of a privileged and corrupt bureaucracy.

That is why rank-and-file committees are crucial. In this fight, workers must discuss and formulate their own demands. The HWRFC and the CFPE propose these as a starting point:

- Implement the necessary public health care measures to combat

COVID-19 in schools, including mask wearing, social distancing, ventilation and remote learning, as part of a broader program to eliminate the virus.

- Massively expand spending on public health and education to ensure workers are equipped with all the necessary resources to do their job safely and to the highest standard. End the privatisation of essential social services.

- An immediate across-the-board pay increase of more than 20 percent. Salaries fully indexed against inflation, with automatic monthly cost of living adjustments to ensure no educator is worse off in the future.

- Hire thousands of teachers and health workers to end the current punishing workloads. Implement minimum nurse-to-patient ratios, and maximum school class sizes of 18–20 students

Governments and the unions will say that these demands are “unrealistic,” because there is no money. But corporate profits are at record levels, the super-rich have made more money during the pandemic than ever before and hundreds of billions are allocated to military spending for catastrophic wars.

They also claim that there is no alternative, but to “live with the virus.” But the scientific tools required to eliminate transmission and to end the pandemic are well known. Universal masking, contact-tracing and targeted lockdowns have repeatedly eliminated the virus in Australia, New Zealand, China and elsewhere. The issue, again, is that these measures impinge on the demands of the financial elite for continuous production and maximum profit-making activities, whatever the consequences in health and lives.

This shows that educators and health workers are in a struggle, not only with this or that government, but with the social order they defend, the capitalist system itself. Two irreconcilable principles exist: the demands of workers that health, education and social need take precedence and the insistence of the ruling elite that profit trumps everything else.

In other words, the experiences that workers are passing through demonstrate that capitalism is incompatible with their needs and interests. The alternative is the fight for workers’ governments that would implement socialist policies, including placing the banks and the corporations under public ownership and democratic workers’ control. In that way, the vast resources of society can be freed up to eliminate COVID, massively increase wages, ensure decent working conditions for all and to guarantee the fundamental right to universal, high-quality education and healthcare.

This is an international struggle requiring the unity of workers around the world, including health and education staff who are engaging in major strikes and protests on virtually every continent. The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), of which the HWRFC and CFPE are a part, exists to establish and develop this unity.

Contact the HWRFC and the CFPE today to discuss this perspective and the fight for rank-and-file committees.

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