Australian health workers and educators support meeting calling for unified struggle against “let it rip” COVID policies

Our reporters
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Health workers and educators are responding enthusiastically to the announcement of a joint, online meeting by the Health Workers Rank-and-File Committee (HWRFC) and the Committee for Public Education (CFPE) on Sunday, November 20 at 3 p.m. (AEDT).

Entitled, “Unite educators and health workers: Oppose the ending of COVID protection measures! Lives before profit!” the meeting will outline a political perspective, including the building of independent rank-and-file committees, to unify health workers, teachers and other sections of workers in the fight for decent wages, working conditions and the elimination of COVID-19.

Health workers and educators have been in the vanguard of rising strike action over the past year in Australia and internationally. These frontline workers, however, are blocked at every point by the trade unions, which limit and isolate all industrial action, enforce sell-out deals and support governments’ “let it rip” response to COVID.

In order to build this meeting, the WSWS is publishing statements from health workers, educators and others, supporting the call for a unified struggle and opposing the lifting of the remaining COVID-19 safety measures by the Albanese Labor government, with the support of state governments and the unions.

We urge readers to share these comments widely on social media, read the October 13 joint statement issued by the CFPE and HWRFC, and register here to attend the online public meeting.

Karen, a secondary teacher from Melbourne:

By abolishing all safety measures, the Albanese government is saying: “Your health, and that of your children, counts for nothing. You must endure multiple COVID infections for the rest of your life, because the profit interests of the corporate elite is the only thing that matters in society.”

The teacher and health unions have sabotaged every attempt to oppose the bipartisan “let it rip” policies. The teacher unions have imposed no-strike agreements, called off strikes, fed teachers lies and misinformation, and censored opposition in order to facilitate the reopening of schools.

Driving to work in August and listening to Gerard Hayes, a leader of the Health Services Union, being interviewed by the ABC [Australian Broadcasting Corporation], his words filled me with disgust. He was calling on the “National Cabinet” to abolish all mandatory isolation requirements immediately because COVID, he claimed, was the same as measles and common colds. He slandered the working class by declaring that “people will ignore mandates anyway.” The union bureaucrats are richly remunerated with bloated salaries for services rendered.

We need to unify our combined strength and create our own fighting organisations—rank-and-file committees—where we can gain access to scientific information, decide what we need to be safe and unify with workers in other sectors.

Workers need an immediate pay increase of 20 percent, to maintain living standards under spiraling inflation. We need the restoration of all essential safety measures and equipment to suppress and the transmission of COVID in hospitals and schools and thousands more teachers and health workers need to be employed. The priority must be social needs not profit.

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Julie, a former registered nurse from New South Wales:

As a retired Registered Nurse of some 25 years, the dangerous "let it rip" policy of the government and big business goes against the grain of everything I learnt during my time as a member of the Nursing Profession, including how to safely care for people who have a contagious disease. Just pretending it doesn't exist anymore and carrying on with our lives "as normal," doesn't fit with any preordained public health policies. I have never seen the Health Care System in such a state of decay and crisis.

I used to think the unions could fix the system but they are unwilling to take up a struggle to overcome the crisis. The unions keep appealing to the Government but nothing changes.

It is my view that nurses and teachers need to fight outside the unions. I fully support the establishment of rank-and-file committees in schools and hospitals. We must unite with rank-and-file committees around Australia and the world and take up a genuine struggle for decent health and education that provides for the needs of the people.

George, a secondary teacher from Melbourne's southeast:

I think we have to unite education workers and health workers. In the health sector if you've got money you'll get treated. I have a relative who has been waiting for 18 months for surgery and because of his condition he can't sleep properly. He is now only just getting a consultation. People shouldn't have to wait this long.

This is happening across all fields. The extra funding to private schools is disgusting. It's capitalist society, this divide. Personally, I think a whole number of private schools should be shut down. Interest rates are going to go up, so this is the time to put money into public schools. Private schools are more like a business but the government is turning a blind eye to the problems in government schools and creating a two-tier system like in the US.

Vicki, a parent member of the Committee for Public Education (CFPE), in Melbourne:

With COVID at its deadliest this year, with more than 13,000 deaths in 2022 alone, the ending of all COVID restriction measures is nothing less than homicidal. The number of deaths greatly exceeds that of the flu, as well as road collisions and drink-driving, for which the government imposes interventions on citizens such as the wearing of seat-belts and the implementation of road-side breath tests. Why is it that our governments, both state and federal, Labor and Liberal, believe that removing of all mitigation measures is appropriate in relation to COVID?

Removing the requirement to report a positive test and doing away with isolation mandates to relieve staff shortages will result in more deaths and long-term health consequences.

With new Omicron variants now showing resistance to the antibody drugs given to immunocompromised people, the situation will only get worse and the most vulnerable will be forced to completely withdraw from society to protect themselves.

The welfare of the community must be put ahead of the interests of big business and provide the appropriate resources for essential services to be able to function efficiently while COVID-zero measures can take effect. No approach other than a COVID-zero strategy will be adequate to protect public health.

Alicia, a primary school teacher from regional NSW:

I have been following the impact of COVID on children's health. Out our way we have many young teenagers suffering with concerning viral complications that the doctors can't (or won't) identify. Anything from arrhythmia to fainting spells, chronic fatigue and enlarged livers.

I personally feel that the unions are in the back-pocket of the state government. Teachers are leaving the profession and will never return. The union is not acting swiftly enough. This is an education and social crisis.

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