"Nurses and teachers were considered heroes of the pandemic, now we are mopping up the terrible outcomes of government policies."

Teacher calls for unity with health workers to fight Australian governments' lifting of COVID protection measures

Sue Phillips
10 November 2022

Committee for Public Education (CFPE) national convener Sue Phillips recently interviewed Amanda, a primary school teacher in Melbourne, about the conditions in schools since Australian federal and state governments lifted basic COVID protection measures last month.

The discussion is part of the campaign for the Health Workers Rank-and-File Committee and CFPE joint online public meeting in Australia on Sunday, November 20 at 3 p.m. (AEDT).

Titled "Unite educators and health workers: Oppose the ending of COVID protection measures! Lives before profit!" the meeting will explain the political perspective needed to fight the official profit-driven pandemic policies and for decent wages and conditions. Register for the meeting here.

What do you think of the lifting of COVID safety measures by the federal Labor government and all the state governments?

I think it's criminal and extremely short-sighted. We know enough about COVID now to understand the very severe health impacts it has on people, especially those with compromised immune systems.

I know people who thought the Labor government would bring about positive change and that Albanese was a so-called better prime minister than Scott Morrison. What is proven once again is Labor and Liberal are two sides of the same coin.

Both bow down to business, put profit before lives. COVID comes in waves, and we know that an inexcusable number of people are dying from COVID. Some dying months later because of the damage COVID is doing to otherwise healthy people.

Just this week alone I heard of two friends who suffered massive heart attacks, one in their 40s, one in the early 50s. This is very unusual. The government speak about personal responsibility but no longer even give us the information that is needed in order to take that responsibility. It is the government that is responsible for this disaster.

What are conditions like in your workplace?

As a teacher I am dealing with high absentee rates due to illness. The well-being of kids and teachers has taken a big hit over nearly three years.

The pandemic has left teachers feeling used and abused. We were asked to change the way that we taught in one second flat. We chopped and changed from one mode of teaching—from online, to another, and then back again so many times, I've lost count. This was a mental and physical load for teachers. We did it pretty well, all things considered.

Then, with COVID being in our communities, we were asked to go back to face-to-face teaching with kids given very little protections. This was despite the fact that everyone knows classrooms are petri dishes when it comes to infection and illnesses. This has intensified the staff shortages that we already had and are now being further impacted every day.

Over the last three weeks, I have had up to six kids split from other classrooms into my classroom because absent teachers cannot be covered by relief teachers and it's exhausting.

Many teachers are believing the government lies that COVID is over. Many don't bother putting ventilation on. Very few teachers and students are wearing masks. Full assemblies happen weekly, camps, excursions, including bus trips, with no masks and whole staff meetings in small rooms. All this happens every week, making it tough for the very few of us who are still trying to avoid COVID.

This week my daughter, who is a secondary school student, got COVID and now I have it. For nearly three years I have been so careful at my workplace, at home, everywhere wearing an N95, opening windows, everything I can to keep my students, family and friends safe. But now with the lifting of all restrictions, students or teachers don't have to wear masks and I think that is how my daughter got infected, and then, unbeknownst, infected me.

At schools, educators and students are being told even if they are infected, and not too ill, they should come to school. This is while I'm still sending sick kids home on a semi-regular basis. Even though I feel really ill and cannot attend school I am expected to

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plan all my lessons for the week.

What do you think about unifying educators and health workers?

Unity is critical because we face similar conditions as frontline workers. We deal with unsustainable workloads and we're both face-to-face with the community, which is riddled with COVID. Both educators and healthcare workers provide vital services to our community so our experiences can and should be shared and learned from. We need to take our safety into our own hands and build momentum in order to say 'No more, "Enough is enough!'

Health workers have a very unique perspective of the pandemic and I look forward to hearing from them at the meeting. I think all working people need to unite; we can't just allow the government to remove safety protections, to work for big business, to protect their own interests, while we continue to work in such unsafe and unsustainable conditions. Our healthcare workers are best placed to advise us on ways to keep our community safe.

I'm pleased that the two rank-and-file committees are coming together so that I can learn more and here alternative perspectives.

What role has the teacher unions played during the pandemic?

The unions have been complicit with the government every step of the way. The Australian Education Union (AEU) here in Victoria, actively blocked any discussion regarding COVID safety in schools and continue to disregard it. They have blocked any united struggle by educators, health workers and others because they know together, we are a force to be reckoned with.

We are all overworked and conditions are worsening with our pay in real terms declining as cost-of-living is increasing.

Teachers and health workers unions in New South Wales have been fined for recent strike action. Where you aware of this?

I had no idea that happened until I attended a Committee for Public Education meeting last week. It is disgusting that workers can be fined for asserting their democratic right to fight for better conditions. But Labor and the unions were involved in creating the laws that made strikes illegal. They made strikes only acceptable under very strict conditions such as during negotiation of workplace agrements. They are using these laws to intimidate workers.

The health and CFPE rank-and-file committees have put forward a series of demands on safety, wages and conditions, including the lowering of school class sizes and nurse-to-patient ratio. What do you think?

The conditions that teachers are working under are absolutely untenable. The demand for class sizes with a maximum of 18 to 20 students and nurse-to-patient ratios to be improved is vital. Nurses and teachers were considered heroes of the pandemic, but now we are mopping up the terrible outcomes of government policies allowing COVID to rip through schools and communities.

There are ever-increasing demands on us. Data collection and useless administration tasks mean that less time is given to provide quality education to students. High ratios in hospitals mean less care for patients.

Teaching is a complex job. It is not about filling empty vessels with knowledge. We deal with well-being, student behaviour, trauma, learning disabilities and the inclusion of a range of needs, constant demands to upskill, curriculum changes and all the so-called great initiatives imposed by others from the top.

It is impossible to do this well with 30 kids. Thanks to our union rushing through an agreement that does nothing to reduce workload, while imposing a very real pay cut, teaching wages along with those of health workers have taken yet another serious hit which has been happening for over a decade. Yes, I agree that we should be compensated, not wage cuts.

What do you think about putting power back in the hands of workers, through rank-and-file committees?

I think this is the only way. Unions have proved they are not there to fight for our conditions. We need to unite our struggles, and fight without the straitjacket imposed by unions.

As a member the CFPE, I have experienced the joining of educators from different sectors. We all face similar situations. Rank-and-file committees are democratic organisations that allow everyone to be heard, an opportunity to be proactive and work toward outcomes for our workplaces and importantly, to learn and understand the historical significance of our situation.

I urge everyone to join rank-and-file committees and to form new ones, linked together here and across the world, because we all share the same conditions.

What do you think about Albanese Labor government's recent budget?

The budget is clearly oriented toward workers paying for the bail-outs to business for the pandemic. This is while COVID is still raging—and now a new wave—with hospitals and ambulance services overwhelmed and aged care in complete crisis.

People are doing it really tough and this is set to get so much worse. My pay is simply not going as far as it used to. I feel for low-income workers and people on welfare payments and I honestly don't know how they manage. Reading about the increasing number of children who go hungry proves families are not coping.

As an educator and a parent, I am disgusted at the lack of funding for public schools. Both the federal Labor government and state Labor are promising even more money to the private system; it is disgusting. Once again it shows the priority of capitalist leaders to further entrench the divide between the rich and poor!

The constant push toward war, funding for military, and the ongoing imprisonment of Julian Assange should be recognised as warnings for workers. Every government is turning further to the right and the unions are working hand in glove with them. We can't accept this.

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