

COVID spreading through schools in Australia

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In the second week of May, at least 11 schools partly or completely returned to online learning in New South Wales (NSW), Australia's most populous state, due to large numbers of COVID-19 infections among staff and students.

These outbreaks give an indication of the severity of a new pandemic wave across Australia. At Liverpool Girls High School in Sydney's southwestern suburbs, it was reported that about 20 percent of staff had either tested positive or were experiencing symptoms of COVID.

Orange High School, in the state's mid-west, also reverted to home learning. In the local newspaper, the relieving principal said the school did not have enough teachers, despite combining classes and hiring every casual available. While some students had COVID infections, the virus had particularly impacted staff.

Other schools, while not returning to online learning, asked students and staff to begin masking again. As with earlier COVID waves, working-class areas of Sydney and regional areas of the state are hardest hit. There are also reports of schools returning to temporary online learning or masking in Victoria, South Australia and Western Australia.

NSW Secondary Principals Council president Craig Petersen told the *Sydney Morning Herald*: "Staff absences due to illness, combined with a critical shortage of casual teaching staff, meant some schools had been forced to move to remote learning."

Nevertheless, the state Labor government declared its opposition to such moves. Deputy Premier and Education Minister Prue Car said shutting down schools amid COVID outbreaks in classrooms and staffrooms was a "thing of the past."

The government's advice for teachers is to return to school after a positive COVID test as soon as they are symptom free. One teacher, commenting on a Facebook post, said symptom-free teachers who had tested positive were under pressure to return to the classroom.

The Labor government's reaction is a deepening of the profit-driven lifting of COVID safety measures in Australia, which has created the conditions for a new wave of

infections and deaths. While this economic "reopening" was carried out under the former federal Liberal-National Coalition government, it was fully supported by the Labor Party at federal and state levels and has been intensified under the Albanese federal Labor government.

Teachers and parents are using social media to report large numbers of COVID cases in schools, not just in NSW but also Victoria, Western Australia and the Australian Capital Territory (ACT). One teacher talked of the struggle to get replacement teachers, noting that "relief teachers are needed for the relief teachers—so many are sick."

A parent from Cooma, a regional NSW town, reported: "Most days my kids have a *minimum* of 1 'Quad.' A quad is a period of no learning where anywhere between 20-120 students (out of 450) sit outside in the quadrangle doing nothing. Some read, or play sport, most talk. The reason for quads is so many teachers are out with Covid.

"My youngest had 5 quads in one day. The remaining period they watched *Matilda the Musical*. They told me about several kids in different years who have had 6 quads, every one outside, multiple times. So, teachers, who were already short-staffed, are even more short staffed as a portion of them are constantly off sick. The ones that are there are overworked, taking classes they aren't qualified for, showing kids movies, or overseeing quads."

The parent added: "I'm not blaming teachers, I'm blaming you @AlboMP [Prime Minister Albanese] @AustralianLabor for creating the situation. You're not concerned with children's education, or the well-being of children and their teachers, you're concerned with using school as babysitting so parents can go to work/shops."

A parent from the ACT, which has a Labor-Greens government, tweeted: "For the third time in 12 months one of my kids has caught COVID at school—their classrooms are poorly ventilated, windows bolted shut in second-storey classrooms, no air purifiers, no one wears masks. Why are we so worried about vaping but so complacent about COVID?"

Since its election last May, the Albanese government has

ended mandatory isolation periods for individuals infected with COVID and its state counterparts have ended the daily reporting of COVID infections, illnesses and deaths. Access to free PCR tests now require a doctor's referral and is limited to people considered "at risk."

In Labor's latest federal budget this month, a \$192 million "Student Wellbeing Boost" program was axed. It had given schools money "for the purposes of supporting students' mental health and wellbeing through the impacts of COVID-19."

At the end of 2021, Labor's Premier Daniel Andrews in Victoria and the then Liberal-National NSW Premier Dominic Perrottet marched in lockstep to reopen schools. Since the formation of the NSW Labor government in March this year, Premier Chris Minns has extended the "let it rip" COVID policies. One of Minns' first actions was to close down free PCR testing sites. In many NSW country areas, it is impossible to get a PCR test locally, even with the required doctor's referral.

The Australian Education Union (AEU) and its state counterpart in NSW, the New South Wales Teachers Federation (NSWTF), bear equally full responsibility for this disaster. They have enforced the school reopenings, as well as striking sellout deals with governments for decades that have led to the acute teacher shortage.

On May 24, the NSWTF tried to cover its tracks in the eyes of teachers and parents. It suddenly expressed its "concern" at the case numbers in schools. It blamed the former Perrottet government for ending mandatory isolation periods, while remaining silent on the Labor government's role. It admitted that it had been meeting with the government's education department Crisis Response and Recovery Unit fortnightly.

In other words, the union, despite denying any knowledge of the case numbers in schools, has been acutely aware of the impact of COVID on teachers, school staff and children. This is another example of the unions' role in the pandemic overall. It has been completely complicit in the return to face-to-face teaching, the removal of safety mitigation measures and the ongoing covering up of the level of infections in schools.

The NSWTF's only advice to its members was to take individual steps, such as wearing a mask indoors and contacting the education department if concerned about inadequate school ventilation. If unwell, it advised members to seek a PCR test "where possible" and, if positive, take at least five days of sick leave, and more if still unwell, apply for additional sick leave which was supposedly "available on a case-by-case basis."

As the WSWs reported in an article on the Senate inquiry into Long COVID, in February AEU federal secretary Kevin

Bates admitted that Long COVID had a "significant impact on the health and safety of AEU members across the country and potentially hundreds of thousands of school students had also been impacted." He acknowledged that "our members have experienced COVID infections multiple times, in some cases four and five repeated infections."

The resulting crisis in the schools is part of a wider resurgence of the pandemic, facilitated by the governments and unions. Nationally, 41,428 new cases and 193 deaths were reported in the week ending May 25.

In NSW, more than 14,400 infections were reported, with cases rising most sharply among 5- to 16-year-old school-aged children and people aged over 90. Similar surges are occurring in other states, with case numbers up by 31 percent in a week in South Australia.

The reported cases only show a fraction of the picture, because access to PCR testing has been severely cut. Given the pressure of employers, it is unlikely that even the less reliable RAT tests are being adequately taken or reported.

With research indicating that each new infection increases the likelihood of experiencing Long COVID, government and union policies are exposing children and teachers to multiple infections. This is truly criminal.

Since the start of the pandemic, the Committee for Public Education (CFPE) has called for proper mitigation measures to ensure the safety of education staff and students, including remote learning where outbreaks erupt.

The long-term health and well-being of students and their teachers cannot be left in the hands of governments or the unions. Teachers, parents and students need to form rank-and-file safety committees that will fight for the necessary measures.

This requires the development of a political struggle against the Labor governments, which are prioritising the interests of the corporate elite over the health and safety of children and school workers. The CFPE calls for the widest discussion among educators on the necessity for a socialist program, which would involve the establishment of a workers' government to implement policies based on social need, not private profit.

Contact the CFPE:

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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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