Union helps university managements reopen Australian campuses as COVID-19 resurges

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Universities in Australia opened for face-to-face teaching six weeks ago despite COVID cases starting to surge again, fuelled by the Omicron variants. Since then, cases have increased rapidly in schools and no doubt throughout universities, but many managements are covering up the infections.

While some universities have pursued a "blended" model, where students have an "option" to attend certain classes online, and some have allowed non-teaching staff to partially work from home, other managements have insisted on a full return to campus.

Many universities have stopped even reporting on infections among students and staff, in line with the profit-driven "live with the virus" program adopted by Liberal-National Coalition and Labor governments alike.

This has proceeded with the support of the trade unions covering university workers, including the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU). At union meetings in February the reopening of campuses was presented as a fait accompli and the significant concerns of staff were overridden.

Growing numbers of university workers are disgusted with the union's role, and the inadequate mitigation measures it has requested from the employers. There is concern about the rising dangers of infections, serious illness, death and debilitating Long COVID.

One worker commented on Facebook: "The NTEU is so pathetic it has to 'push' for face masks? Please look and see how ineffective they are! Can't even get face masks without begging. A decapitated union."

Another casual academic reported: "I've been asked to teach two f2f tutorials. I'm terrified of getting sick and being forced to work through it."

A similar Twitter comment said: "I am being made to turn up to work, a university, whilst people are dying, 1000s getting covid, and lots of kids getting it too. Money before lives is what Australia is about these days."

There have been significant outbreaks, including one at the Australian National University (ANU), which saw 660 students residing on campus being infected in the first week of term.

Dr. Katie Freund, an education researcher at ANU, wrote on Twitter: "Is the 'vibrant on campus experience' worth the health of the #ourANU community? It's only Day 2 of semester! We are not meeting our duty of care for students."

More recently an ANU academic tweeted: "Is there any way to avoid getting COVID if you're face-to-face teaching in universities? Like, surely it's not inevitable? (This is not about any university in particular, or even Australia, but most universities in most countries)."

University teaching staff members are reporting constant streams of students testing positive. Many universities, however, are not making records publicly available, so the extent of spread is being hidden.

The *World Socialist Web Site* recently spoke to several academics about the dangerous reopening.

John, an academic from Sydney, said: "I don't see any real measures that the university is taking to protect staff and students from risk in teaching spaces. For example, it isn't clear to me that the ventilation in offices or teaching spaces is suitable. The state government and the university clearly don't care about people catching COVID.

"I don't feel that the government has, at any time, handled the pandemic well. We have gone to a model that prioritises the profits of businesses to the detriment of the public. This is particularly true of the outrageous way return to school has been done. Parents have a

legal obligation to send their children to school, and so are completely unable to protect themselves from COVID. Basic measures that schools could take to protect families have not been implemented."

Lucy, a Western Sydney University academic, commented: "The push to return to campus is endangering the health and safety of all teaching and professional staff, not to mention that of thousands of students.

"The NTEU at our university has merely stood quiescent, despite the fact that it has the power and arguably the duty, to oppose such a move. The NTEU seems to value good relations with management above the health and safety of its members.

"Our university's demands on staff are driven by the profit imperative. Many teachers are forced to work in sweatshop conditions to increase its profits. What does the NTEU do with our dues? It certainly doesn't use them to defend our rights at work.

"Most of our younger academics are employed at level A on three-year contracts with probationary periods of two years. This places them in an invidious position. They bear excessive workloads but cannot complain about this exploitation for fear of reprisals."

Universities have been reopened as part of the murderous "let it rip" policies of governments around the world. For the ruling financial elite, reopening schools and universities to face-to-face teaching is an integral part of ensuring workers go back to work to continue producing profits.

According to an online petition at the Queensland University of Technology (QUT), the management has told staff members they do not have to inform co-workers or students if they have COVID-19. At the same time, QUT is packing staff and students into classrooms with unsafe density levels.

Confronted by the complicity of the pro-business trade unions, university workers and students should take matters into their own hands. They need to unite and form rank-and-file committees—completely independent of the unions—to oppose the unsafe conditions. They should demand the closure of infected campuses and a return to online learning to protect students and staff.

To discuss how to take forward this fight, and form rank-and-file committees, contact the Committee for Public Education, a rank-and-file organisation of educators, students and parents supported by the Socialist Equality Party:

Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/commforpubliceducation/
Twitter: @CFPE_Australia
Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact