

Australian teachers salute courageous stand of striking teachers in West Virginia

Our reporters
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Teachers in Victoria and New South Wales, Australia's two most populous states, have expressed powerful support for the struggle being waged by their counterparts in West Virginia.

Members of the Committee For Public Education (CFPE), established by the Socialist Equality Party to fight for the rights of all teachers and students to a free, high quality and fully resourced public education, are convening meetings in their schools to inform teachers of the historic strike, to discuss its international significance and to send messages of support.

Last Monday, the CFPE invited several teachers at Moonee Ponds West Primary School in Melbourne, Australia's second largest city, to be photographed in order to express their solidarity with their counterparts in West Virginia. Posted on the *World Socialist Web Site* Teacher Newsletter, the photo has been viewed more than 38,000 times on Facebook alone, shared by 485 people, and has received expressions of thanks and solidarity from teachers across different counties of West Virginia.

Earlier today, a meeting was held at the school to discuss the latest stage of the struggle being waged by the West Virginian teachers, and to view several of the video reports and interviews from West Virginia posted on the *WSWS Teacher Newsletter*.

CFPE convenor Sue Phillips introduced the discussion by explaining that more than 30,000 teachers in the impoverished US state had taken "illegal" strike action in defiance of anti-democratic laws, but they were now being pressured back to work on the basis of a sell-out agreement between the unions and the state government. The proposed 5 percent wage rise was in reality no such thing, with health insurance costs swallowing any increase. Phillips also explained that the nominal wage rise would be offset with equivalent budget cuts to other crucial public services depended on by working people, including Medicaid.

The role of the unions in West Virginia, she said, was similar to that of Australian education unions against teachers here. Last year, in the state of Victoria, the

Australian Education Union rammed through a regressive, three-year industrial agreement after blocking mass meetings of teachers to discuss the proposed deal and censoring opposition.

Teachers attending Wednesday's meeting unanimously endorsed the following resolution:

"We Moonee Ponds West primary school teachers from Melbourne, Australia express our solidarity with and support for striking West Virginia teachers. Your courageous stand in defence of public education, for decent pay and health entitlements, is in defiance of decades of education budget cuts by successive Democrat and Republican governments, policed through union sell-outs.

"Teachers cannot trust Governor Jim Justice's announcement and the unions' claim yesterday that the deal offered by the Senate of a one-off 5 percent rise represents a 'victory.' None of the key issues, above all adequate healthcare insurance, have been resolved. West Virginia teachers have the democratic right to consider and discuss the proposed agreement, with a vote at teacher-led meetings deciding whether or not to return to work."

At the end of the meeting, teachers watched a CFPE video in which Phillips explained the critical issues in the West Virginian teachers' strike. She concluded with a commitment to West Virginian teachers that the CFPE will "continue to support you, publicise your struggle, and provide our active collaboration."

Staff members spoke to CFPE members about the struggle in West Virginia. One raised that it had "energised" the school staff. Another commented in the staffroom: "I fully support the teachers in West Virginia. What they are doing by striking is fantastic—we should have done that here last year when the union sold us out with our agreement."

Classroom teacher **Jamie** said: "I think the strike in West Virginia is exciting. We have people who are working in a profession that is so exploited and who are standing up and doing something about it. It is resonating with so many people around the world. Seeing this take place shows how it can have such an impact on one state, as well as the rest of

the world, is great. The conditions are so awful, with people thinking about whether they take medicine or not, depending on whether they have enough money.

“I’m really concerned about the role of the official media in all this, what they say and how they portray this to the rest of the world. I have only found out about the West Virginia teachers through emails from staff here, leaflets left in the staffroom, and talking to colleagues. I think it is great that thousands of teachers in the US have viewed our photograph of support from our school—they need to know that they’re being supported here.”

Mandy, another teacher at the school, said: “I have been following what is happening in West Virginia through the WWSWS. The teachers there are on such low wages. The situation with healthcare is shocking, they’re buying their own supplies for school, feeding kids who don’t have food.

“We can relate here to what is happening in West Virginia with the union. Last year a union deal was pushed through with no mass meetings, no opportunity to debate, and the information from the union was misleading—the so-called ‘improvements’ are not there. At the time people who didn’t read the analysis of the WWSWS couldn’t really understand what was really going on, and some ended up believing the spin of the unions. Because there were no mass meetings people didn’t get to hear the opposed side.

“You can’t trust the unions—don’t rely on the unions to support you, that seems to be done and dusted. We pay the unions to get us better conditions but they are selling us out to look after their own needs. I have been following what the WWSWS says about forming rank-and-file committees. I originally thought that sounds quite different, but it becomes clear that we need to stand up and fight for ourselves. This seems like a turning point and we need to encourage other workers to come out in support of West Virginia teachers.”

Another CFPE-sponsored meeting, attended after school hours by teachers and support staff, was held yesterday at Rosehill Secondary College in Melbourne’s north-western working class suburbs.

CFPE member Frank Gaglioti opened the meeting by explaining that in taking strike action, the West Virginian teachers were fighting both the state’s repressive “right-to-work” laws, and a union sell-out deal, compromising a contemptuous pay rise and nothing at all on the teachers’ demands for health insurance, under conditions of soaring health costs. He raised that while the teachers were the 48th lowest paid out of the 50 US states, the state’s legislators were among the richest in the country.

“At the same time, children are coming to school hungry, due to the high level of poverty. West Virginia is now at the centre of the opioid crisis that must be having an inevitably retrograde impact on schools,” Gaglioti said.

In response to Gaglioti’s remarks, one teacher remarked: “The fact that these teachers are defying the anti-strike laws is enough for me to support their strike!”

Before the meeting, Gaglioti had sent to every teacher at the school an email containing a video of a member of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) in the US, Zac Corrigan, addressing a huge student-led protest, defending the West Virginia teachers in Charleston, West Virginia last Saturday. At the meeting, he played a short YouTube video, with comments from individual teachers as to why they had decided to strike.

The meeting concluded with the CFPE resolution, which was passed unanimously:

“Rosehill Secondary College teachers and education support staff from Melbourne, Australia express our solidarity and send our fraternal greetings to West Virginian teachers, and hail the courageous and historic stand you have taken. Your struggle for a living pay, health entitlements and the necessary funds for a high-quality education is in opposition to the years of education budget cuts by successive Democrat and Republican governments, resulting in some of the lowest pay rates for teachers in the US.

“We recognise that your stand was taken in defiance of repressive laws barring strikes and, most importantly, the teacher unions’ rotten betrayal. They have brokered yet another sell-out agreement. You have stood firm to threats of government injunctions, threatening fines and jailing of teachers.

“We support calls for the establishment of rank-file committees, reaching out to other teachers and students, and other sections of the working class across West Virginia, the US and internationally, as the only way to defeat the government’s threats.”

At Footscray City College, west of Melbourne, a meeting of teachers and education support staff was addressed by CFPE member Will Marshall, who moved a similar resolution, which was also passed unanimously.

Speaking to the *World Socialist Web Site* after the meeting, Marshall said that teachers were eager to read WWSWS material on the West Virginia teachers struggle, because the Australian media had carried out virtual blanket censorship since it began. He pointed out that “teachers have also expressed admiration for the fact that the WV teachers wouldn’t accept the union deal.”



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