Australian teachers call for “immediate, tangible action” over coronavirus

The Committee For Public Education
19 March 2020

This article has been amended to include the exact wording of the final motions that were passed at the AEU sub-branch meeting at Footscray High on March 18, 2020.

At least half of the staff at Footscray High School—some 50 teachers—voted yesterday to take “action to resign” from the Australian Education Union (AEU) if it failed to take “immediate, tangible action” to safeguard staff and students from the threat posed by the coronavirus pandemic.

The meeting and vote at Footscray High took place just hours after the federal Liberal-National Coalition government of Prime Minister Scott Morrison, with the full backing of all Coalition and Labor Party state and territory governments, declared that there would be no closure of schools in Australia due to its impact on the broader economy.

Attempting to blackmail teachers and parents into accepting the potential infection of tens of thousands of people through the school system, Morrison asserted that up to 30 percent of health and emergency workers would have to leave their posts to care for their children in the event of closures, or that at-risk elderly grandparents would have to provide care.

Footscray High is a major secondary school in the inner-western, working-class suburbs of Melbourne, Australia’s second largest city and the capital of the state of Victoria.

Four motions were passed. The first stated:

“That the sub-branch expresses its strong and continued concern at the lack of an adequate response from AEU state and national leadership regarding COVID-19.

“If the AEU fails to take immediate, tangible action so that ALL state schools are able to adequately safeguard the health and wellbeing of staff and students, then this sub-branch will take action to resign from the AEU.”

The second resolution advocated that the teachers’ designated health and safety (HSU) representatives “pin” the campuses of the school as an “unsafe” workplace.

This resolution stated: “The AEU sub branch to recommend the school’s OHS representative issue a Health and Safety pin on the Department of Education website, citing the clear health risks to staff and students, given the fundamental lack of financial support from the DET, which has hampered efforts by the school to implement adequate health and safety measures issued by the Department.”

The third resolution stated:

“If the DET continue to fail to close schools, that the school implement immediate safety and support measures to assist staff and students who are deemed at high risk of serious infection, such as older staff members (50+), or those in direct contact with the elderly (i.e. caregivers) and staff or students with chronic medical conditions.

“Such measures could be as follows: Allowing staff at high-risk to immediately work from home (regardless of closure status), without having their sick leave quota affected; Pushing the DET to provide reimbursement of the purchase of items to assist with healthy and safety monitoring, such as:

· Infra-red thermometer that does not require skin contact, used in Singapore, Hong Kong, and China, in all high-traffic areas (including school) to help monitor for COVID-19 symptoms.

· Hiring a dedicated School Nurse, or allocating a first-aid trained staff member to take on the position.

· The purchase of hand-sanitiser to be placed in all high transit/contact areas (i.e. classrooms, staff rooms, etc.)

· Holding an information session (classroom-sized) for students on proper hand-washing procedure, social distancing, etc.)

“Additional suggestions to be raised and discussed in the Sub-Branch meeting.”

The meeting overwhelmingly supported a fourth resolution, moved by Will Marshall, a longstanding

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teacher at the school and member of the Committee For Public Education (CFPE), for the formation of a workplace Committee of Action at Footscray High.

The resolution read: “Regardless of what the union does, we propose to immediately form an independent action committee of teachers, education support staff and parents. The health and safety of teachers and students cannot be left in the hands of the government, employers or union. The committee will develop a series of measures and demands to combat the spread of the disease, protect students and staff, reaching out to parents and carers to support a common unified campaign of action. Further, these resolutions be circulated to all schools across the state, calling for the urgent establishment of committees of action in every school.”

Almost 50 teachers at the school also signed an open letter addressed to the Footscray High School leadership, Department of Education and Training and the state and federal government calling for the immediate closure of the schools or “dramatic and substantial changes” to their operations.

The COVID-19 outbreak serves to underscore that workers must take matters into their own hands. The federal and state governments, along with their union collaborators, have only one concern: maintaining the profitability of business in the face of an enveloping global economic crisis.

The working class cannot defend any of its democratic and social rights through the framework of the unions. The trade unions have demonstrated over decades that they are not workers’ organisations, but agencies of the government and corporations.

New organisations must be established, starting with rank-and-file committees in every workplace, that are open to all workers, regardless of whether they are union members or not, and whether they are employed on full-time, part-time, casual or contract conditions.

The CFPE issued a statement yesterday that should be read, discussed and debated at every school across Australia: “Close Australian schools to stave off coronavirus! Form action committees of teachers and school staff!”

The statement outlined the following policies for consideration by Action Committees that are established at schools and in working-class communities:

* For as long as schools and universities remain open, they must become centres of mass coronavirus testing, for children, families, teachers, students, and school workers.

* The closure of the country’s school system must be preceded by guarantees of 100 percent income protection for every person who is compelled to stay at home to mind their children.

* Free and high-quality computer and internet access must be guaranteed to every family to ensure that accessibility to online learning provisions is not dependent on wealth. Any household without internet access or an individual computer for each student in the home must be provided with these basic rights immediately, without charge.

* Publicly-funded psychologists and other health professionals must be made available to children at risk from the disruption and potential trauma of their interrupted education.

* Guaranteed income must be provided to all education workers during what could be an extended closure, including all graduate teachers without sick and long service leave, casual relief teachers, all education support staff, and contract staff.

The statement asserted the class standpoint that the “guiding principle must be that the shutdown of the education system to minimise the spread of the coronavirus is not an individual or a family-based responsibility, but a social responsibility.”

Socialist policies, starting with working-class control over the banks and major corporations, must be implemented on a world scale. The CFPE and SEP urge all workers to take up the fight for an independent political movement of the working class for international socialism.

Teachers and education workers can contact the CFPE via email at cfpe.aus@gmail.com or on our Facebook page: www.facebook.com/commforpubliceducation/. The CFPE Twitter account is https://twitter.com/CFPE_Australia.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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