

Australian Committee for Public Education holds successful online meeting on pandemic crisis

Our reporters
6 April 2020

The Committee for Public Education (CFPE) held a successful public meeting yesterday on “The COVID-19 pandemic: The political issues confronting educators.”

More than 70 people attended, including primary and high school teachers, education support staff, academics, and undergraduate and postgraduate university students. People linked in to the online event from across Australia, both regional and metropolitan centres, including in Western Australia, South Australia, Queensland, Victoria, and New South Wales.

Importantly, educators from several other countries participated, including New Zealand, South Korea, and the United States. The Socialist Equality Party’s (US) candidate for vice president, Norissa Santa Cruz, brought greetings to the meeting.

Sue Phillips, the national convenor of the CFPE and a member of the Socialist Equality Party’s National Committee, delivered the opening report. “Within just a few weeks of the pandemic, governments and politicians internationally have been exposed as politically, economically, socially and morally bankrupt,” she told the meeting. “They have been unable to put in place a coordinated plan or provide the necessary resources and measures to deal with the situation.”

Phillips contrasted the situation in the schools and universities internationally—UNESCO figures indicate country-wide closures in 188 countries, affecting 1.5 billion students—with Australia, where Prime Minister Scott Morrison has sought to keep them open.

“The government’s response has been dominated by lies and misinformation about safety, mixed messages, incompetence and above all else indifference to the

health and wellbeing of educators, students and children,” she said. “Its statements are driven by economic considerations, not health. Governments are risking the lives of thousands in order to protect the ability of corporations to continue to make profit.”

The opening report detailed the chaotic conditions within the schools, which have been semi-closed on a state-by-state basis. Teachers are being pressured into working extra hours to prepare and deliver online learning activities. Phillips also reviewed the complicity of the teacher unions, which have done nothing to defend the safety of educators and students, but instead are working closely with the government.

Phillips reviewed the socialist perspective advanced by the CFPE in its March 18 statement, “Close Australian schools to stave off coronavirus! Form action committees of teachers and school staff!”

“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,” she said. “We insist on life over profit. We encourage all educators and school workers to sign up as members of the CFPE to develop this discussion and begin immediately forming Action Committees.”

The report was followed by a lively discussion period. Educators in New Zealand, South Korea, and the US reported on the situation in their areas. Several teachers in Australia made suggestions on what teachers could do amid the pandemic, report on the situation in their schools, and ask questions. There was an important discussion in response to questions about the viability of forming Action Committees, independent of the trade unions, and the danger of

education department and school disciplinary measures against teachers.

Other teachers chose to use the online chat feature to contribute to the meeting. Several reported on the unsafe conditions that educators were being exposed to as the federal government insisted that schools operate as usual.

“In my area, council closed all outside playgrounds as they believe it is not safe, but the school must be opened,” a Sydney primary school teacher wrote. A student teacher also from Sydney added: “The AP [assistant principal] at the local primary school has told [staff] they are not allowed to wear masks because it instilled fear.”

Another wrote: “My experience of the final week was a classroom which was business as usual, no social distancing! Teachers unable to supervise student hand washing on an individual basis. Students using communal drinking fountains one after the other. It’s impossible to organise, especially as teachers were flat chat trying to provide home learning booklets and learn about setting up remote learning classrooms. Teachers at my school are still working daily through the holidays...”

John Braddock, of the Socialist Equality Group in New Zealand, spoke about the coronavirus cluster in Auckland’s Marist College. There are 72 confirmed cases, highlighting the health risks in leaving schools open.

In her greetings, Norissa Santa Cruz, the SEP (US) vice presidential candidate in this year’s election, endorsed the perspective advanced by the CFPE: “We recognise in this fight the determination of the working class to take matters into their own hands,” she said. “We recognise that the move by teachers Australia is an important struggle in what is a global fight.”

Santa Cruz detailed the enormous medical, social, and economic crisis wracking the United States, as well as the emerging struggles of the working class to defend its interests amid the pandemic. “The main question at hand for the working class in the US, Australia and around the entire globe is, in whose interests will society and its vast resources be run and directed?” she concluded. “Who will run society? Will it be the discredited and parasitic financial elite or the international working class?”

Sue Phillips concluded the online meeting by urging

educators to join the fight for the formation of Action Committees in their schools, institutions, and communities.

“Teachers need to strike out independently outside the unions and establish their own committees,” she said. “This arises now out of the necessity to protect the lives of teachers, students and educators. We urge people here to join the CFPE. This meeting is not a one-off, we will organise more. We encourage educators to sign up for our newsletter, read the *World Socialist Web Site*. Become active in this situation—people can no longer sit back and hope that the unions or some other organisation is going to do something to protect our lives. It is up to us to do this ourselves.”

Teachers and education workers can contact the CFPE via email or via our Facebook page. The CFPE Twitter account is @CFPE_Australia.

The authors recommend:

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[3 April 2020]

“Obviously there has to be a revolt” US teachers speak out on the coronavirus epidemic
[28 March 2020]

Australian school system in chaos after coronavirus semi-closures
[27 March 2020]

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[18 March 2020]

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