

Australian teachers speak out against unsafe conditions

Our reporters
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Earlier this month, the Committee for Public Education (CFPE) in Australia held a successful online meeting entitled “The COVID-19 pandemic: The political issues confronting educators.”

More than 70 teachers and other workers attended from states across Australia and several other countries including South Korea, New Zealand and the United States. The Socialist Equality Party’s (US) candidate for vice president, Norissa Santa Cruz, brought greetings to event.

Sue Phillips, the National Convenor of the CFPE, delivered the opening report, reviewing the unsafe conditions that teachers have been subjected to as governments have insisted that schools remain open despite the pandemic. She placed this in the context of the criminally-negligent response of governments around the world, which have sought to shore up the fortunes of the corporate and financial elite at all costs.

Phillips outlined the CFPE’s call for teachers to take action independently of the corporatised trade unions to ensure their safety. She linked this to the need for a socialist program aimed at meeting social need, not private profit.

The report prompted a lively discussion. Below are comments from some of those who participated. Teachers can face disciplinary action for speaking out so their remarks are anonymous.

A primary school teacher: The CFPE is leading the way in organising teachers and giving us a voice. The meeting explained the issues affecting Australian teachers, as well as highlighting the shared experience educators are having across the world. The government is giving us information that supports their plan to keep the economy going and the union is in agreement. This just supports the profit system. Government information has been misleading and confusing.

The CFPE’s honest and thorough account reminds us that we need to continue to question what we are told. They highlighted that we do have rights and we need to organise ourselves and expect more for our profession. The meeting provided the knowledge and solutions to support teachers to be healthy and to keep our students safe as well.

The meeting raised the issue that teachers are being silenced. We are not provided with a space for discussion. It is disheartening to hear of teachers being threatened with disciplinary action for speaking out. There has been a significant rise in teacher discontent. The union and the government are working together to keep us in unsafe conditions. The CFPE has provided an alternative that puts our rights and the rights of our students first. Thank you for your leadership.

A secondary teacher: The meeting reinforced my thoughts around the paralysis of capitalism to deal with any issue that doesn’t derive profit. The current social crisis we are facing has laid bare the corruption of government, industry and the open complicity of the unions, as well as highlighting the reaction of the media. Every action by capitalism now subjugates the well-being of workers to profit. This is clearly viewed through the drive to get people back to work at all costs.

The other issue of significance for me is the now open questioning by workers of the current crisis. They are disillusioned with and are moving outside the union bureaucracies. A personal experience—union members were openly angry that they have had very little input into their conditions and felt betrayed that they have little say over their own safety and health in this crisis.

Finally, the meeting confirmed suspicions that behind the crisis, the union movement is actively dismantling conditions without worker engagement. That workers

will end up “paying for this crisis” made critical sense. Huge sums are being handed over to business and that money will have to come from workers’ labour and the gutting of social infrastructure.

The most important takeaway from the meeting was that workers all over the world are now seeing capitalism in a light never previously observed. It is openly disregarding life and the safety of the working class. We are seeing that the allocation of resources is not to support social safety but to enrich a few super-wealthy oligarchs.

A retired teacher: The crisis has revealed the callous disregard for teachers by their employers and governments. From the government there is no concern in state schools about the education workforce. On one hand, schools are essential child minding services so closing them would impact terribly on the economy and the education of children, but on the other hand, the people who provide these services are expendable. This attitude is more intense, if possible, when directed at early childhood education and childcare.

The education unions are involved in the conspiracy against their members, engaged in secret conversations with government. The complacent belief held by many teachers that the union will be a reliable way of organising is breaking down. Now teachers are discussing organising outside the union, although there is a fear of the consequences given the intimidatory language from the government.

Facing possible death and likely horrific illness, complacency and compliance are not realistic options. The staff of Footscray High School has shown the power of organising outside the union. Teachers are becoming more audacious and organising themselves.

The situation is global: This was an amazing meeting. I hope there will be more meetings like this soon.

A primary teacher: I heard so many things that really resonated with what is going on at the moment. I think that we need to become more vocal in schools just like staff at Footscray High School has done. The way the situation is going, I dread going back after the break as I think we will be back to square one with the blind leading the blind.

The report painted a picture so well. From South Korea, New Zealand and the US it is a repeating pattern of flawed political leadership choices impacting education and society. This is a unique moment in time

that needs strong decisions made about firstly preserving health.

A secondary teacher: It was great to hear from people around the globe in terms of how the pandemic has affected them. I felt like the direction around action moving forward was very good. My only criticism was that it lacked information about what we do in schools moving forward in term two.

I do feel that the role of the unions is very important but they’ve lost their way and become the mediators of the status quo. I am on the school Consultative Committee and the union sub branch secretary, and have been trying for a long time to change the system from within and hold decision makers to account. But now there is no doubt in my mind that we need revolutionary change in this system for education to move forward.



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