

Australian Committee for Public Education holds online forum on COVID-19 and the universities crisis

Our correspondent
19 May 2020

The Committee for Public Education (CFPE) held a vital public forum last Sunday on “The COVID-19 pandemic and the crisis in the universities.” Over 50 people participated, including academics, university professional staff, school teachers, TAFE employees and university students. People joined the online event from across Australia.

To highlight the international character of the crisis, Jean Shaoul, an academic from the UK and regular contributor to the WSWs, reported on the devastating situation confronting universities and university staff in the Britain, one of the countries worst-hit by COVID-19.

Mike Head, a Western Sydney University academic, WSWs correspondent and member of the CFPE and Socialist Equality Party (SEP), gave the opening report. “We called this forum to discuss the implications of the greatest health, economic and political crisis in our lifetimes,” he said.

“This pandemic, which was both foreseen and foreseeable, is a damning indictment of the capitalist system. The massive loss of life and livelihoods is not simply the product of a virus but the profit-driven decisions of big business and governments.”

Head contrasted the actions of governments in bailing out the corporate-financial elite with their decades of cuts to education and healthcare, and now demanding a rapid return to classrooms and workplaces, regardless of the risk to workers’ and students’ health and safety.

Head reviewed the role of the trade unions in enforcing this agenda, detailing the National Tertiary Education Union’s (NTEU) “national framework” agreement that allows university managements to cut wages by up to 15 percent and destroy thousands of jobs, including by forced redundancies.

“If the NTEU succeeds in imposing this agreement on

university workers, it will set a precedent globally, as well as for other industries throughout Australia. Already, led by the Australian Council of Trade Unions, unions in the retail, hospitality and clerical industries have agreed, completely behind the backs of their members, to impose cuts to penalty pay rates and working hours.”

Head said: “We need to reject the false choice being put forward by the governments, management and the unions: accept such concessions or risk redundancies. This is the framework created by the financial elite itself.

“The crisis in the universities did not start with the pandemic. Ever-larger class sizes, soaring student fee debts, rampant casualisation and corporate restructuring have increasingly dominated campuses for decades. Universities have been starved of funds, with billions of dollars cut by every Australian government since the Gillard Labor-Greens government.

“At NTEU meetings, CFPE and Socialist Equality Party speakers have raised the necessity for a struggle to completely reorganise society along socialist lines...We have explained that this means breaking from the NTEU’s pro-capitalist political and industrial straitjacket and forming new working-class organisations.”

The report was followed by a host of questions and responses from participants, who either spoke or posted chat comments. Numbers of questions raised the terrible pay and conditions faced by casuals, who have been the first to have their jobs eliminated. Other comments ranged from queries about the role of the NTEU and the terms of its national deal, to questions about the CFPE’s alternative proposals.

One Swinburne University tutor said that when the university cut the tutorial teaching rates to marking rates and reduced one tutorial from three hours to half an hour, she reported it to the NTEU but it said it could do nothing.

Another casual lecturer/tutor agreed that the union blocked all resistance. “Exactly!” he said, “I asked for a strike and NTEU said we can’t!” He said he made only \$48,000 a year for teaching four subjects per semester, which “is more than a full time load.” He commented: “So you are right that it was not good before this COVID pandemic either.”

A casual tutor said the NTEU did not look after casuals at all, just the interests of full-time members. In response, Head agreed about the casuals but said the NTEU had for years helped the employers cut the conditions of both full-time and casual workers, dovetailing with the transformation of universities into businesses.

“As a result, universities have become one of the most casualised industries, with almost two-thirds of all staff being casual or on short-term contracts,” Head said, emphasising that the CFPE demands full-time permanent jobs for all university workers.

Evrin Yazgin, president of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) at the University of Melbourne, spoke about the dire conditions facing students, particularly international students.

Yazgin referred to Prime Minister Scott Morrison’s declaration that international students who could not support themselves should “return to their home countries.” He condemned the xenophobic line being promoted by the media and all the major parties—including the Greens—as part of a broader campaign to whip up nationalism as the ruling elite prepares to enter another US-led war, this time aimed against China.

Jean Shaoul reported on the similarities with the corporatisation of the universities in the UK and the role of the unions in implementing it.

“It is absolutely clear that the unions and their ‘left’ supporters will do nothing to defend workers and students,” she said. “This is a universal phenomenon in the face of an intensely internationalised arena: education. It is striking that education, like so many public services that once took place behind national borders, is now international.”

Shaoul said the universities were using the pandemic to push through measures they had previously been unable to implement. University workers’ pay had already fallen 21 percent in real terms since 2009, and they faced a £200,000 cut in their retirement pay. Now university chancellors were calling for pay cuts, freezing appointments and eliminating thousands of jobs (see: “UK universities prepare all-out assault on staff and

students in wake of pandemic”).

A participant asked a particularly important question: “If the universities do end up losing millions and the government refuses to help, what options do we have to propose that are not cutting costs via workers’ wages? Cutting capital works? How can we save casual jobs as well as prevent this work overload proposed for full time workers, not that they are not already working more for less?”

In reply, Sue Phillips, a school teacher and national convenor of the CFPE, referred to the wave of strikes that had taken place globally over recent years, with teachers at the forefront in country after country.

Phillips said: “Governments claim there is no money. But there is money for banks, businesses and the military. What is required is for this mass opposition to be given political leadership. Action committees of university academics, bus drivers, cleaners must be formed.”

Cheryl Crisp, the SEP assistant national secretary, further explained: “The claim that ‘we’re all in this together’ is so much rubbish. The poor, the lower-paid, immigrants, young people and old people are the hardest hit by this pandemic...”

“Governments have no lack of money to bail out the corporations and the banks. Boris Johnson is happy to clap for health care workers but has no money for personal protection equipment for them. It is not a question of lack of money, but who has the money, who controls the money.”

Crisp said a different sort of state is required, one in which a workers’ government would allocate resources “not toward the requirements of the elite, but of society as a whole.”

Head concluded the forum by urging educators to join the CFPE and the fight for the formation of Action Committees at schools and universities, independent of the pro-capitalist trade unions, to lead the opposition to the assault on educators and students and the working people as a whole.

A video of the forum is available on the CFPE Facebook page. Education workers can contact the CFPE via the Facebook page or its Twitter account, @CFPE_Australia, or email the SEP at sep@sep.org.au.



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