Australia: Committee for Public Education holds online forum on COVID-19 threat

Our reporters
30 July 2020

The Committee for Public Education (CFPE) and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) held a successful online forum on July 18 to discuss the dangers confronting educators and students in the coronavirus pandemic. Participants attended from across Australia and internationally.

Sue Phillips, national convenor of the CFPE, opened the forum by highlighting the spiralling COVID-19 pandemic and the criminal policy of governments internationally to reopen schools and force students and educators back into unsafe conditions. Phillips pointed to the escalation of outbreaks in Melbourne schools, which exposed government misinformation that schools are safe, and exposed the complicity of the teacher unions.

David Brown, a teacher and member of the Socialist Equality Party in the United States, spoke on the dire situation facing American educators, who confront a homicidal drive by the Trump administration to reopen schools. He discussed the growing opposition among educators and other layers of the working class, including through the formation of rank-and-file safety committees in the auto plants.

Tania Kent, a long-standing educator and member of the Socialist Equality Party in Britain, described the reckless herd-immunity policies of Boris Johnson's government. She noted the growing opposition of parents, who are threatened with fines by the authorities if their children are not sent back into the schools. Kent emphasised the need for the organisation of independent action of the working class.

A lively discussion followed. The history and role of the unions was discussed, together with the need for rank-and-file safety committees to be formed in every school, university and workplace.

Important contributions were made to the discussion by Mike Head, an academic and member of the SEP in Australia, and Evrim Yazgim, a leading member of the IYSSE at the University of Melbourne. They detailed the assault and restructuring of the universities, involving sackings and wage cuts that are being carried out in collaboration with the tertiary education union.

After the forum, several participants spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site*.

Ros, a secondary teacher from South Australia, said: "I have been absolutely blown away by the number of COVID-19 cases in schools in Melbourne. You don't hear the truth about what is going on. The contributions from the international speakers, Tania and David, were great. I found it very interesting what David from the US said about the auto industry, where workers are saying enough is enough, and you are not sending us to work anymore in unsafe conditions."

She continued: "I have said this to some of my friends and workmates at school—we are either going to have to roll over and accept what is going on, that workers are going to be sacrificed for capitalism, or we are going to have to rebel and have an uprising of some kind."

Ros concluded: "I think the call for nationwide strike of educators by the SEP in the US is great—I wish it would happen here now rather than wait for it to get worse. I hundred percent support the call for the fight for rank-and-file communities taking unified action internationally. I'm lost on how make that happen but would love to be part of the organisation, absolutely."

Phoebe, is a tertiary student in Melbourne. She spoke of the role of the state Labor government in Victoria. "I didn't agree how the government used excessive use of the police on the Flemington and North Melbourne housing estates. Police were used in the hard lockdown, instead of bringing in health and social workers to support people who needed assistance. The premature opening of restaurants, businesses, etc., was the cause of this second wave of coronavirus."

She added: "I think rank-and-file committees are incredibly important for workers and students to unite. Trade unions aren't offering the right type of safety protocols or adequate access to equipment, social distancing measures, or standing in opposition to the return to work. It is important to be able to oppose being sent back either to study or to work and not have to face consequences for standing up for

© World Socialist Web Site

your safety and rights."

Ivan, a PhD student at Western Sydney University, said: "I found it an interesting forum, particularly hearing about the union offer to the universities for a 15 percent pay cut. The union publication *Advocate* seems to be celebrating the agreements reached while also suggesting more job losses to come. Considering the profitability of the universities over the last decade, it is a terrible bowing out to the university CEOs by the union. The background on the true role of the unions as an extension of universities' business was insightful."

Susan, a primary school teacher in Melbourne, said: "What governments are saying about schools being safe is a lie. Classrooms are oversized petri dishes. I read a quote the other day that resonated with me: 'Schools cannot control nits, how are they supposed to control COVID-19?' Schools are being used across the world to keep the economy open. This puts teachers, students and families at risk. I'm concerned that I am being compelled to work on-site with younger students and appalled that our colleagues in secondary schools who teach VCE [senior subjects] are teaching full classes face to face."

Susan spoke on the role of the teacher unions. "The fact that the government and the union do not publicise the number of outbreaks in schools shows they have something to cover up. They want parents to send their kids to school so they can continue working. CEOs, politicians, have the freedom to work from home and keep their kids at home. Teachers and the working class do not share this luxury. That is why in the first instance there were more cases in the well-travelled upper class, but now more cases in the working class.

"Teachers and the working class cannot rely on the unions to look after their safety or wellbeing. I agree with the unification of teachers, students, parents and academics independent of the union. It was really good to hear from teachers across the globe. We really are facing the same issues. It is not an American issue, nor is it an Australian or British issue. That too can be said for so many issues facing education across the world."

Jack, a university student at Latrobe University in Melbourne, said: "I thought the international perspective was absolutely fantastic. We totally need to show more international perspectives, have international voices. We really need to push the fact that the systems or the circumstances affecting us are not unique to Australia. The macroeconomics that is hitting us, is prevailing, it is global. I think around COVID-19 there are many areas of misinformation, it was good the meeting pointed this out."

Chiara, a 21-year-old in Melbourne now studying to become a teacher, also attended the CFPE forum. She responded: "It's been frustrating and disheartening to see the blatant disregard governments have had for an industry that is very much the foundation for our society.

"Being able to hear about the specific demands mentioned in the meeting, highlighted how education workers and students can be fully considered within school shutdowns—that is, educators being economically supported, public funded psychologists being made available for vulnerable students, ensuring online learning is inclusive of all with internet access, and technology being made readily available. This was all important. These demands reveal what proactive action looks like, and how simple it can be, to not only invest in the safety of our society but prioritise education and combat the effects of the virus on our education systems."

Campbell, a secondary teacher in regional Victoria, spoke with the WSWS about his experiences: "What is happening at my school adds emphasis to the comments made at the CFPE-IYSSE meeting. This week we had a student testing positive in another school in our town. A teacher from my secondary college, whose partner works at the affected college, went home when it was confirmed.

"It's becoming quite real, with an understanding by a growing number of teachers that they've been hung out to dry and that we are the guinea pigs for the education department. Educators are being blackmailed to go back to work because of the need to keep the economy running."

He added: "People are saying they haven't heard from the union, there is no leadership there or direction, no support. So there is a growing disillusionment that belonging to the union is not all it's cut out to be."

Campbell concluded: "Hearing first hand from educators, Tania and David, in Britain and the United States lent itself to a greater understanding of where we're going and what they've experienced. We all have to work internationally amongst all the working people across all the nations to ensure we can move forward."

The CFPE urges all educators and students to contact us to discuss taking forward the fight for safe working conditions.

Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com
Facebook: www.facebook.com/commforpubliceducation
Twitter: @CFPE_Australia

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site