

Committee for Public Education (Australia) online meeting discusses global struggles of teachers and educators

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The Committee for Public Education (CFPE) held a successful online panel discussion on November 29, to discuss the implications of the ongoing pandemic, focusing on the tasks confronting educators and students and the working class more broadly, especially the fight for educator and student safety. Over 40 people participated, including educators, students and supporters from across Australia, as well as France, Britain, the United States and South Korea.

The panellists were CFPE national convenor Sue Phillips, a member of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) national committee and long-standing educator in the primary sector; Renae Cassimeda, a member of the SEP in the US and of the US Educators Rank-and-File committee, San Diego and Los Angeles, and a secondary school history teacher; Tania Kent, a member of the SEP in Britain, chairperson of the UK Educators Rank-and-File Committee, and an educator in special needs; and Will Morrow, a member of the SEP in France and WSWs journalist covering the development of the pandemic across Europe.

The meeting was held amid heightening class tensions internationally, rapidly escalating social inequality and the failure of capitalist governments to protect the working class from the global pandemic. Opposition among educators, parents and students to prematurely reopening schools is growing, with teachers' strikes in France, teacher sickouts in the US, school student strikes in Greece and parent boycotts in the UK.

The SEPs internationally have called for the development of rank-and-file committees, to provide the deep-seated opposition to the reopening of schools a political direction and leadership. These committees are aimed at organising workers in workplaces everywhere, independently of the trade unions, which have refused to defend the health and safety of their members. This call is being taken up by increasing numbers of educators, students and workers, with educator rank-and-file committees already established in the US, Britain, Germany and Australia.

Phillips opened the discussion, quoting from an International Committee of the Fourth International statement posted on

February 28, calling for a globally coordinated emergency response to the pandemic. "In that statement we said the danger of the virus cannot be overstated, and the working class must demand and fight for comprehensive and urgent emergency measures. The pandemic, by its very nature, is a global event. It doesn't respect any national borders, and it requires an internationally-coordinated solution."

Phillips reviewed the global extent of the pandemic as a "situation that can only be described as utterly catastrophic. What is taking place is a crime against humanity, perpetrated by the capitalist class in every country... Any suggestion by scientists, health experts or epidemiologists about implementing a policy of elimination has been rejected outright by governments and business as an intrusion into profits."

Morrow spoke on the catastrophic situation throughout Europe. "Every day since Monday has seen more than 500 people die in France. On a per capita basis this would be around 3,000 deaths per day in a country the size of the United States. More than 52,000 people have died in France alone. Between 10,000 and 20,000 are contracting the virus every day..."

"Health care systems are strained to breaking point. A further spread of the virus will threaten them with being completely overwhelmed. In France, 75 percent of hospital beds are now occupied as emergency beds."

Cassimeda responded to a question about the impact on communities of the deaths in the school systems in the US. "A few weeks ago, I spoke with an Arizona teacher, who contracted COVID while working in person among her colleagues over the summer school time, teaching students online. One of her colleagues died. The teacher spoke of the loss of her colleague and the impact on the whole community."

"When these single deaths are reported, an immense effect is felt immediately by families and school communities, communities at large... In the US there are over 240,000 cases tied directly to K through 12 schools, with the overwhelming majority being students. In the month since schools reopened, at least 50 educators have lost their lives and this is undoubtedly under-reported."

Kent spoke of the crisis in Britain. "If you want to see what

'herd immunity' looks like, then you need to look at the education system and what's actually happening within the schools in the United Kingdom. They are the vectors for this virus within the community.

"I work in a special school. I've isolated twice now because three of my six staff have had COVID; our caretaker died on Friday because of it. These are the conditions that teachers are forced to work in. I eat my lunch in my car because I can't go into the staff room. It's an horrendous situation."

Several panellists talked about the criminal role of the trade unions in helping governments end lockdowns and reopen schools and other non-essential workplaces.

Morrow said: "There is enormous opposition to the [reopening] policies among workers and young people, shown by the strikes and demonstrations that have already developed and the anger that is growing. To the extent that the governments have been able to impose these policies so far, it has depended on the role played by the trade unions, which in Europe, as in the US and Australia, have been responsible for spearheading the governments' reopening policies."

Kent added: "When the British government tried to reopen schools in June, that was stopped by the opposition of millions of parents, students and teachers in protests and petitions. The unions did everything in their power to dissipate that opposition—to subordinate it to the program of the government.

"Our rank-and-file committee was established to insist that the opposition must be independent of the Labor Party and the trade union bureaucracy and, in fact, must lead a political rebellion against them. Taking the measures that are necessary to protect lives, to protect the wellbeing of workers, including their economic interests, can only happen through independent action, through a united campaign in the UK and more broadly."

Cassimeda talked of the role of the unions in isolating educators and their struggles, time and time again. She said "educators lack organisations which they control and that they can use to fight back in a coordinated, unified way," noting that only through a unified struggle could educators oppose the attacks on conditions and wages, as well as defend their safety.

Phillips explained: "The experiences of the working class with the unions over decades has made absolutely clear that workers cannot defend anything if they remain trapped within these organisations. The working class has to develop its own independent action. The new organisations, above all else, have to be democratic organisations, where workers can speak out about their experiences. In the unions you can't speak about your experiences, you can't put forward anything that's opposed to the agenda of the union."

Outlining the tasks of the rank-and-file committees, Kent said: "As the virus has escalated, our demands have developed, to become far more of a political character, for a political general strike within Europe as a whole, linked to other workers as the only viable means of defending lives. We have gone

beyond minimal safety measures. Schools are now death traps for workers."

Cassimeda said: "There is widespread opposition to schools re-opening, but the opposition has to be united, not just schools in a district, but in states, throughout the country and internationally, and also across industry."

Cassimeda said another reason for the formation of the committees was to expose the truth about the spread of the virus. "There is an overt attempt to censor cases within school districts. We have 24 states here that are not reporting outbreaks in the schools. This is part of the deliberate concealing of information, which is part of the broader back-to-work campaign."

Phillips commented: "Rank-and-file committees are critical, even if there is a vaccine. It's not a question of going back to what was before. We don't know what is going to happen with COVID, but we do know that the working class, in order to defend its conditions and public education, requires the independent action of educators, combined with other sections of the working class. If teachers and society as a whole want to develop a high quality public education system it requires the intervention of the working class and educators in the establishment of such committees."

Morrow noted in his concluding comments: "The capitalist class is not in a fight against the pandemic, it's in a fight against society. It's waging a war, in which the victims are the hundreds of thousands of people who are dying as a result of the policies being pursued in the interests of the capitalist class. The development of the response to that in the working class poses the necessity for socialism. The perspective that the Socialist Equality Party is advancing is the only realistic, viable program to respond to the pandemic."



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