

Australia: Committee for Public Education online meeting opposes school re-openings and calls for rank-and file committees

Committee for Public Education
26 August 2021

The Committee for Public Education (CFPE) in Australia held a successful online meeting on Sunday to discuss the development of a global movement to stop schools reopening under conditions of rising Delta variant infections.

Reports by speakers—Patrick O’Connor from Australia, Prageeth Aravinda from Sri Lanka and Zac Corrigan from the US—provoked animated discussion from among the more than 100 people in attendance. Streamed live on Zoom, the entire event can be watched below.

Participants included teachers, academics, university students, TAFE pupils and parents from across Australia, and others from the US, Germany, Sri Lanka and New Zealand.

Attendees passed the following resolution: “This meeting of the Committee for Public Education sends solidarity greetings to striking teachers in Sri Lanka, to educators, students and parents in the US, and to others internationally who are opposing the reckless and homicidal policies of reopening schools. We pledge to take forward the fight for rank-and-file educator committees in Australia linking up with the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.”

CFPE national convenor Sue Phillips chaired the meeting, explaining the historical and international significance of the event. Educators and children, she said, were on the frontlines of a highly dangerous ruling-class campaign to remove COVID-19 safety restrictions and reopen the economy to maintain the profits of big business and finance capital. School openings were a key part of this homicidal strategy.

The first speaker, Patrick O’Connor, a teacher and member of the CFPE and the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) National Committee, reviewed how capitalist governments everywhere responded to the pandemic by placing profit over human safety and lives.

O’Connor cited a February editorial from the *BMJ* (formerly the *British Medical Journal*) which described the collective response to the pandemic by governments internationally as “social murder.” The editorial noted government claims “to have done all they can or that the pandemic was uncharted territory, there was no playbook. None of these are true. They are self-serving political lies from the ‘gaslighters in chief’

around the globe.”

The speaker explained how this hostility to scientific advice was reflected in the Australian ruling class and its rush to reopen schools, even as the country faced its worst ever surge of infection.

This drive was wholly bipartisan in Australia, he continued. Liberal and Labor, federal and state governments have adopted the mantra, “We must learn to live with the virus” and refuse to introduce measures necessary to stop transmission and end the pandemic. The teachers’ unions, functioning as government mouthpieces, play a central role in straitjacketing teachers and allowing this policy to continue.

While popular anger and opposition had forced a temporary retreat of the reopening drive, teachers, students and working families had to take matters into their own hands, O’Connor stressed.

Prageeth Aravinda, a teacher and chairperson of the Sri Lankan Teachers-Parents-Students Safety Committee, reviewed the ongoing online strike of 250,000 teachers in Sri Lanka for improved wages and in opposition to the Rajapakse government’s refusal to implement serious measures to combat the pandemic. Sri Lanka now has the fourth highest COVID-19 death rate per capita in the world.

Aravinda said that the Rajapakse government has opened schools from time to time, despite rising infections, but that “schools have been closed since April because of strong opposition from students, parents and teachers.”

The speaker reviewed the more than two-month-long online teachers’ strike, explaining the widespread hostility of teachers to the government’s refusal to address decades-long wage demands. Teachers are among the lowest-paid public sector workers in Sri Lanka.

Along with the ongoing strike, “teachers have withdrawn from practical examination-related duties for GCE Ordinary Levels, Sri Lanka’s major exams for Grade 11 students, and preparing student applications for Advanced Level Examinations and Grade 5 scholarship exams,” Aravinda explained.

Despite this, the “main teachers’ unions have fully endorsed

the government's claim that 'an immediate increment for salaries is not possible due to the current economic crisis in the country,'" the speaker said. Late last month, the Sri Lankan Teacher-Student-Parent Safety Committee held a successful online meeting with over 100 people in attendance.

Zac Corrigan, a member of the Socialist Equality Party in the United States, was the last speaker. Corrigan plays a leading role in the Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee and participated in an on-the-spot WSWs reporting team intervening in strikes of educators across the US in 2018.

Corrigan warned that the US faced an "impending disaster of monumental proportions." The pandemic catastrophe, he said, was the result of the US ruling elite's homicidal perspective of lifting and eliminating COVID restrictions and opening the economy for the benefit of big business.

More than 60 percent of schools in the US have reopened, with 180,000 child COVID-19 cases being reported in the week ending August 19, a 50 percent increase over the previous week, leading to the tragic deaths of 24 children.

In Mississippi, Corrigan said, nearly 6,000 children had tested positive for the disease, 30 times more than the previous semester. A six-fold increase of infections among teachers and staff, 1,496, had been reported. Florida set an all-time record for COVID-19 deaths with one person in the state dying of the virus every seven minutes. In Louisiana, an astronomical surge was underway with 28 percent of all new cases among children from newborns up to those aged 17.

While this deadly spread was occurring, a massive campaign was underway in the corporate media condemning governments for being too slow in reopening schools to in-person learning.

Mehring Books, the publishing arm of the Socialist Equality Party (US), is proud to announce the publication in epub format of Volume 1 of *COVID, Capitalism, and Class War: A Social and Political Chronology of the Pandemic*, a compilation of the *World Socialist Web Site's* coverage of this global crisis.

Corrigan played a video clip in which US President Joe Biden, in answer to an eight-year-old's question, "Will I catch COVID, will I die from COVID?" lyingly replied, "Children don't get COVID very often. You're the safest group of people in the whole world."

Corrigan linked the struggle against in-person learning to an important fight undertaken by Volvo workers in recent months. While the media and the unions worked to isolate and black out the workers' strike action in Virginia, the SEP intervened aggressively, bringing the struggle to the attention of workers everywhere. It also provided the Volvo Workers Rank-and-File Committee with valuable information and advice, without requiring them to agree with the SEP's political program.

This allowed the Volvo strike to gain support from workers internationally and through that, to hold firm for three months against one of the biggest corporations in the world. It also resulted in the Volvo workers drawing definite conclusions about the role of the unions: that they represent the companies,

not the workers, and no amount of pressure would change that.

The Volvo workers struggle, Corrigan emphasised, pointed the way forward for the rest of the working class, underscoring the necessity to broaden the fight among a wide layer of the working class and mobilise its real strength, independently of the trade unions.

The reports produced a range of questions. These included whether an eradication policy would work; how to secure a worldwide lockdown; the role of rank-and-file committees; and the growing social inequality between the public and private school systems in Australia. One attendee asked whether socialism had to be achieved before the eradication of the pandemic took place.

Corrigan explained that the two could not be conceived of separately, that the working class needed real science and that a fundamental difference existed between what scientists were advocating and the responses of the ruling class to the pandemic. The SEP was fighting to bring a knowledge of science to the working class, so that it could develop the political understanding of the necessity to fight for socialism, he said.

Corrigan and other speakers urged attendees to participate in an online meeting the next day hosted by the *World Socialist Web Site* involving international scientists discussing the measures required to eradicate the coronavirus, stop the wave of death and end the pandemic.

Phillips ended the meeting with an appeal to all those in attendance to become active in the struggle against school reopenings and apply to join the CFPE and the Socialist Equality Party.

The CFPE can be contacted by:

Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com

Facebook: www.facebook.com/commforpubliceducation

Twitter: [@CFPE_Australia](https://twitter.com/CFPE_Australia)



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact