

Teachers and parents respond powerfully to Committee for Public Education public meeting in Australia

Our reporter

15 November 2021

The Committee for Public Education (CFPE) in Australia held a productive online meeting on Saturday, with over 100 people participating from urban and regional Australia, as well as New Zealand, the UK and Germany.

Almost half of those present were attending their first CFPE meeting, having heard about the rank-and-file organisation through its Facebook page and other social media. Attendees thanked the CFPE for its political analysis and accurate information. Others reported on conditions in schools or the dangers facing their families in a constant stream of chat messages during the meeting. Several expressed their relief at learning they were not alone in their concerns about school reopenings.

Saturday's two-and-half hour event was entitled "Oppose the dangerous reopening of schools in Australia! Form and join our rank-and-file action safety committees!" It reviewed the dangers facing teachers, parents and students and the profit interests driving the decision of Australian governments, and their international counterparts, to reopen schools under conditions of rising coronavirus infections.

Detailed reports were provided by CFPE national convenor Sue Phillips, International Youth and Student for Social Equality member Elle Chapman and Thomas Scripps, the assistant national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party in Britain.

CFPE member and teacher Patrick O'Connor, who chaired the meeting, began with an overview of catastrophic increases in coronavirus infections and deaths internationally and the necessity for the establishment of rank-and file committees to protect lives.

"The murderous policy of so-called herd immunity, or letting the virus rip, was previously publicly associated with the most extreme right-wing heads of government—Boris Johnson, Jair Bolsonaro and Donald Trump. Now, however, it is the approach of virtually every government around the world," O'Connor said.

CFPE convenor Phillips explained the importance of the "How to end the pandemic" international seminar held on October 24, involving scientists and workers. Hosted by the *World Socialist Web Site* and the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, the webinar, which has been viewed by over 20,000 people, outlined the necessity and strategy for the global elimination of COVID-19.

Phillips reviewed the rapid reversal of limited COVID-19 containment policies by Australian governments, state and federal,

of every political colouration.

Australia had gone from "no cases of community transmission in early June to thousands in the following months. In previous outbreaks, governments stated that it is not safe to end lockdowns before community transmission is reduced to zero or close to it. Now, the opposite is the case," she said.

Phillips said the warning made in a recent CFPE statement "Oppose the dangerous reopening of schools in Australia! Form rank-and-file action safety committees!" was being tragically confirmed.

"In the five weeks since reopening, over 540 schools have been closed or partially closed in Victoria and over 300 in New South Wales," while the government, media, Australian Education Union and the New South Wales Teachers Federation are consciously suppressing information about how widespread the infections are.

"The union bulletins have unquestioningly relayed government decisions and when CFPE members have disagreed with the union decisions at meetings we've been threatened with disorderly conduct and told we would be thrown out of the meeting. Resolutions calling for the union to publish school infections data have either been ignored or teachers told the union does not have time to follow up this work.

"That is why the CFPE fights for educators to form rank-and-file safety committees in every school and community, independent of the unions, to develop the widest public discussion on the dangerous situation in the schools... Humanity has the means to end the pandemic in the matter of months through an international strategy of elimination."

Chapman, the next speaker, said children and young people were being placed in great danger, but a deep-seated and increasingly angry opposition to the government's policies had emerged among students and parents. This opposition was reflected in petitions initiated by high school students and signed by thousands, calling for a resumption of online education and postponement of exams.

The so-called opposition, the Labor Party, had given the Liberal-National Coalition bipartisan support throughout the pandemic. Chapman contrasted this with comments from high school students posted on the WSWs about the serious dangers facing young people and working-class youth in particular—sentiments that found no expression in the corporate media.

A two-minute video from Lisa Diaz in Britain was screened just

before the presentation by Scripps, the final speaker. Diaz and other parents in the “Safe Ed for All” group have been holding weekly school strikes and other protests to oppose the Johnson government’s “herd immunity” return-to-classrooms policies.

Scripps reviewed the devastating coronavirus death toll and infection rates in the UK—over 165,000 killed, more than 580,000 hospitalised and over 1.2 million suffering from Long COVID. The deaths, he said, included 109 children. More than 69,000 children had Long COVID, over 10,000 of them for longer than a year. Scripps explained the destructive impact of Long COVID on key organs—the lungs, heart, kidneys and the brain.

“The burden of death and disease that has been thrown on the working class is staggering,” Scripps said. This catastrophe was the outcome of conscious policy choices by the Johnson government, backed the Labour Party and the unions, who were all working to normalise death and serious illness due to COVID.

“The task of squashing resistance among school workers was handed to the education unions, who did not call a single strike action over the danger of the pandemic—actually voting against one last November, as cases in schools were surging.” The unions had allowed educators who did speak up with safety concerns to be victimised.

Scripps said the Friday school strikes called by Diaz reflected a developing break by the working class with the unions and the Labour Party. “This must be encouraged, but it must also be developed. It is necessary, but not sufficient, to simply reject these thoroughly rotten organisations. The rebellion against the betrayals of the trade unions is only sustainable to the degree that something fundamentally new is constructed in their place.

“That is the significance of the rank-and-file committees of educators, transport workers, manufacturing workers and others that we have begun to establish internationally. These committees, by freeing the workers from the unions and giving them the ability or organise internationally in defence of their own independent class interests, create the basis for a genuine struggle against the pandemic, involving all the necessary measures.

“The lesson of the UK, as everywhere else, is that the consequences are grave and that only the independent political intervention of the working class can avert a catastrophe,” he said.

These reports were followed by an hour-long Q&A session, contained in the video above.

This included a supplementary report by a CFPE member responsible for publishing daily data on school closures and school infections.

“No one else was collecting this data, no one was reporting it,” she said. “There are groups on Twitter that are re-tweeting our data, our comments and our work because it’s the only source of this important data.”

Teachers and parents posted chat messages on the situations they faced, including lack of proper ventilation in classrooms, contradictory directives on mask wearing and changes in “close contact” definitions.

Over 150 chats were posted, demonstrating the high-level of engagement and the yawning political chasm between teachers, students and parents, and the official bipartisan, unions-endorsed “live with the virus” agenda.

One parent commented: “My 7yo became a close contact twice in the first week that all year levels returned in Victoria. She has tested positive on day 5 and now her 4yo brother is positive. We have a 2yo who has not yet tested positive, and the same for myself and my partner, but we have been basically been told it’s inevitable that we will catch it.”

A parent from Shepparton, a regional city, reported that all primary and secondary schools in the area had been impacted, with cases increasing by between 32 and 40 per day, but schools were being kept open. In another chat she wrote: “No school closures mean schools are becoming vectors of this dangerous virus in our isolated community. This is something we have managed to control twice very successfully with lockdown and isolation. Parents are extremely stressed and worried.”

A New Zealand teacher thanked the CFPE for its “incredibly valuable webinar” and described the situation facing early childhood educators in that country. “There is no mandating of mask wearing, with open doors and windows advised as safe ventilation,” she wrote. “There has been very little media coverage of the cases that are occurring... As such we simply don’t know how many [centres] have had, or currently have positive cases.

“Our schools have partially reopened and already, in just the last 2 weeks alone, there were 7 schools with positive cases reported in the media. Yet parents and teachers are being told reopening is safe.”

Another teacher responded to suggestions that petitions or similar protests could force governments to change their policies. “The politics of pressure has been found to be a dead-end, time and again,” he wrote. “‘Letting off steam’ might make you feel like you may have achieved something, but we need to move away from that perspective, especially when the ruling elites set out to cover up every aspect of this criminality. We need to develop and engage in independent rank-and-file safety committees.”

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wsws.org/contact