Committee for Public Education (Australia) holds online meeting opposing schools reopening

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The Committee for Public Education (CFPE) in Australia held a well-attended online meeting last Saturday, titled "No to Australian school reopenings amid record COVID infections! Educators, students, parents—join the fight for rank-and-file safety committees!"

The event drew a wide range of participants from across regional and urban Australia, and was also viewed by several international supporters of the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS). Participants included longstanding members and supporters of the CFPE, as well as several teachers and parents who were attending their first meeting of the organisation.

Detailed reports were provided by Evan Blake, a member of the Socialist Equality Party in the United States and a leading writer for the WSWS, and Patrick O'Connor, national committee member of the Socialist Equality Party in Australia and WSWS writer.

CFPE national convenor and public school teacher Sue Phillips, who chaired the meeting, began by providing an overview of the situation facing teachers, students and parents as the new school year commences. Highlighting the criminal role of the ruling elite in every country, Phillips explained: "The reopening of schools is the implementation of a 'let it rip' policy, consciously infecting the population, the youngest and the most vulnerable, which is now the murderous program of virtually every government across the globe. Educators are regarded as little more than babysitters whose lives are expendable and easily replaced if necessary."

The first report was delivered by Evan Blake, who began by emphasising the significance of the WSWS Global Workers' Inquest into the pandemic. Encouraging those present at the meeting to participate, Blake stated that its "primary focus is on the working class and bringing forward the experiences that workers in every industry have gone through over the past two years and in the present."

Outlining the situation in the United States, Blake noted the huge increase in infections, hospitalisations and deaths that has accompanied the Omicron variant.

Describing the impact of the recent surge in schools, Blake referred to a recent interview published on the WSWS in which a psychologist described the mental and emotional impact on children of bringing the virus home to vulnerable care givers. She also reported a shocking incident of children witnessing emergency medical teams treating a teacher who collapsed in front of them. Blake explained the immense trauma being inflicted on students: "Children who lose their caregivers, specifically those who inadvertently infected them, are likely to experience survivor's guilt, which is a symptom of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)."

In outlining the response of the ruling elite to the unfolding disaster, Blake made reference to a recent speech by US President Joe Biden who "made no reference to this horrific reality and refused to even acknowledge the over 446,000 Americans who have died from COVID-19 since his inauguration."

Blake pointed to an upsurge in struggles being waged by students and workers: "There's a real shift taking place, and a sense that things can't go on like this anymore."

In concluding his report, Blake noted the critical role being played by educators' rank-and-file committees in the United States, led by the Socialist Equality Party,

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which have undergone significant growth as more educators and students are getting involved in building them.

Patrick O'Connor delivered the main report. Reviewing the recent explosion in case numbers in Australia, he noted that "the situation will only get worse if schools are permitted to open up their doors in two to three weeks."

O'Connor referred to recent statements by the Prime Minister Scott Morrison on the need to keep schools open in order to keep workers in their workplaces. The speaker explained: "Schools are being forced open to ensure that workers remain in their workplaces, continuing to generate surplus value extracted by big business and finance capital. This is why we have on the WSWS characterised the reopening drive as a class war measure."

O'Connor went on to review the abandonment of even basic mitigation measures, including vaccination, air filtration, isolation for close contacts and contact tracing. He drew out the class implications, stating: "Elite private schools will make their own arrangements, including remote learning options. Several of these institutions previously funded their own vaccination medical staff, turning their grounds into vax hubs to allow their students priority access while other families were having their vaccine bookings cancelled due to supply shortages."

In reviewing the role of the teacher unions, O'Connor noted that they had not called "a single mass meeting or members forum to discuss the pandemic. To the extent that they have been able, the bureaucracy has sought to suppress any discussion among ordinary educators on the COVID situation." The unions were enforcing the reopenings and seeking to prevent any struggle against them.

He went on to note that significant opposition to the return to face-to-face learning has developed amongst parents and teachers. O'Connor concluded his remarks by referring to the Committee for Public Education's programmatic demands, including the suspension of face-to-face teaching amid community transmission of the virus.

He explained: "We are seeking an independent and unified mobilisation of working people, through the formation of rank-and-file safety committees of teachers, school staff, parents and students within every school community that will take forward the fight for online teaching and learning, as an essential measure within a broad emergency response aimed at eliminating the dangerous coronavirus."

Following the reports, the meeting was opened for questions and comments. Questions were raised about whether the vaccine only approach was viable and the role of the unions in suppressing opposition. Participants also had many questions about the formation of rank-and-file committees, with some teachers asking how to go about establishing them.

Teachers, parents and caregivers also shared their experiences, both in the chat and by speaking. One parent said, "I am giving up work so I can home school my children. It has been an extremely hard decision and will make it very difficult for us financially but I also recognise that we're lucky that we can try to keep our children safe that way where most can't. I am so angry. The strategy is forced infection."

Several others made very powerful contributions and comments regarding their concerns regarding the return to school.

The online meeting reflected the fact that the CFPE and the Socialist Equality Party are the only organisations fighting in opposition to the dangerous school reopening drive. As Evan Blake concluded: "As the pandemic deepens, it's ever more critical that educators and all workers develop rank-and-file committees like the CFPE and those that have been formed in the US, across Europe, in Brazil, Turkey, Sri Lanka, and other countries, and coordinate our struggles globally. The unfolding tragedy must be stopped, and that will only come through our independent initiative."

Contact the Committee for Public Education to join the fight:

Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com
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To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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