

Committee For Public Education public meeting discusses the crisis in Australian schools and the role of the teacher unions

Our reporters
26 June 2022

The Committee for Public Education (CFPE) held a public meeting on Sunday June 19, “The crisis of public education, the betrayal of the teacher unions and the need for independent rank and file committees.” More than 80 participants attended including educators from the primary, secondary and tertiary sector, as well as parents and other workers from across Australia and internationally.

The meeting was addressed by leading members of the CFPE in Australia and an SEP member and teacher from the United States.

Chairing the event, Patrick O'Connor, an SEP and CFPE member who is also an educator, placed the issues facing teachers in their broader context. He noted that the discussion was the first organised by the CFPE since the election of the Anthony Albanese Labor government.

O'Connor outlined the intensifying social, economic, and political crisis: “Escalating inflation is eroding the real wages of the working class, interest rate hikes are threatening numerous mortgage holders with the loss of their home and outright destitution, and now corporate operators of privatised electricity networks are threatening to impose blackouts unless higher profits are guaranteed. The situation is unravelling with rapid speed.”

The opening report was delivered by Sue Phillips, the national convenor of the CFPE and a long standing public school teacher. Phillips is also a member of the SEP and serves on its National Committee.

Phillips began by providing an overview of the experiences of educators in Australia over the previous six months, including the multiple betrayals carried out by the teacher unions. She exposed the political alliance between the Andrews Labor government in Victoria and the Perrottet Liberal government in New South Wales that forced the reopening of schools amid broad teacher, parent and community concerns over COVID.

Phillips noted that the state governments could not have enforced the reopening without the complete complicity of

the unions, which called off planned industrial action at the beginning of the school year.

Phillips reviewed the recent sell out industrial agreement delivering a massive real wage cut to teachers and school workers in Victoria negotiated by the Australian Education Union (AEU) and the state Labor government. She explained: “Far from the unions representing a collective defence of jobs, wages and conditions, the reality of the situation is the opposite. The union works in complete partnership with governments no matter what political party. It doesn't unite educators and school workers but divides and isolates them. It doesn't fight for improved conditions but imposes the dictates of business, organising defeat after defeat.”

Phillips added: “The AEU campaign for the agreement was not a mistake, weakly devised or the result of poor negotiating skills, but consciously planned by the union bureaucrats. It was aimed at imposing the demands of the Labor government, blocking any industrial action and making sure there was no possibility of a unified struggle with teachers in other states, such as New South Wales or South Australia. Above all, its purpose was to straitjacket and silence any opposition, in particular from the CFPE, which the union is fully aware represents the only real politically organised opposition.”

The report concluded with a call to join and support the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC). “Lessons must be drawn out of this immediate experience and the decades of betrayals,” Phillips explained. “Teachers and workers must begin to take matters into their own hands. New organisations of struggle must begin to be formed in the workplaces, building a network of rank-and-file committees, independent of the trade unions.”

The second speaker was Carolyn Kennett, a tertiary educator and member of the SEP and CFPE. Kennett's report dealt with the impact of the COVID pandemic

nationally on schools and families. She explained that late last year state and federal governments, Labor and Liberal, made the criminal decision to lift all health restrictions that impinged on the profits and wealth of big business and the ultra-wealthy, regardless of the death toll. The opening of the schools for face-to-face teaching was a critical measure within this, aimed at ensuring that workers could be dragged back into their workplaces with teachers functioning as child minders.

The final report was delivered by Renae Cassimeda, from the United States. Cassimeda is a teacher, and a member of the SEP in the US, as well as a writer for the *World Socialist Web Site*. She is also a leading member of the West Coast Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, which has fought to mobilise Californian educators against the COVID threat to teachers and students.

Cassimeda began her report by explaining that she would be “speaking on the crisis of public education in the US, its relationship to the entire social and political crisis of capitalism.” She added that “there are a number of parallels to the conditions that exist in Australia’s public schools. We insist this is an international phenomena and requires an international solution.”

Cassimeda outlined the unprecedented teacher shortages as millions leave the profession, sweeping cuts in funding of public education leading to failing infrastructure, decades of below-inflation pay rises and ballooning workloads.

The speaker also raised the horrific mass shootings in US schools and their impact on both teachers and students. Importantly, she explained: “The violence that took place at Robb elementary [in the town of Uvalde] is connected to the official violence of the capitalist system and the overall indifference to human life and suffering experienced by the masses of youth and working class people by the ruling elite through its policies and politics.

“One of the ways this has been most acutely demonstrated is through the homicidal policies of the entire political establishment to the COVID-19 pandemic; mass-infection policies started by the Trump administration and carried forward by the Biden administration.”

Cassimeda went on to discuss the impact of the pandemic on education in the US and the major role played by the trade unions in forcing teachers into unsafe working environments. She spoke on the importance of the educator rank-and-file committees across the US which have consistently opposed the reckless reopening of schools. Cassimeda concluded by explaining, “Only through a mass movement of the international working class supported by the youth to address the root disease of capitalism can we bring about an end to these horrors.”

During the reports a number of participants posted in the

chat box, outlining their own experiences with COVID and the crisis in the education. One teacher reported: “My school has lost five staff so far and found two to replace them. Learning support specialists are covering senior classes they aren't method trained in, or otherwise there are no covers. COVID means clusters are away in classes making continuity of teaching impossible.”

Another added, “I currently have more than 100 students in Year 11 and 12 who do not have a teacher for their subject.”

The meeting opened for discussion following the reports. Several important questions were raised about the role of rank-and-file committees and how they could be formed.

Cassimeda responded to the questions about the growth of the rank-and-file committees, saying they were initially established for educators, parents, school staff and other workers to demand protection, the shutdown of unsafe schools and nonessential businesses, and other emergency measures that were necessary to stop the spread of the virus. Over time they have developed to discuss issues in public education and organise a united struggle to oppose austerity measures but also to look at broader social and political issues such as the threat of war and its implications for workers.

Phillips added: “The purpose of these meetings is to discuss and work through these issues, seek to clarify them for teachers and workers and take forward the development of an understanding within the working class of the need for rank-and-file committees.

“It is not a question of changing the leadership of the unions. These organisations now are completely bankrupt for workers to defend themselves. That is why we are saying new organisations have to be developed. The Committee for Public Education, established by the Socialist Equality Party, is a rank and file committee, it is spearheading the fight to develop rank-and-file committees nationally among educators, parents and students.”

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