

Australia: CFPE and Health Workers Rank-and-File Committee hold successful, well-attended public meeting

Our reporters

22 November 2022

The Health Workers Rank-and-File Committee (HWRFC) and the Committee for Public Education (CFPE) in Australia held an online public meeting on Sunday, 20 November, titled “Unite educators and health workers: Oppose the ending of COVID protection measures! Lives before profit!”

The meeting was attended by over 150 participants, including nurses and other health staff, educators at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels, workers from a wide range of sectors, as well as students and youth. Attendees joined the meeting not only from all around Australia, but also from the United States, Canada, Japan, South Korea, and New Zealand.

Chairing the event, Patrick O’Connor, a CFPE member and teacher, opened by placing the meeting within the context of the surging COVID-19 pandemic and the abandonment of public health measures by governments worldwide. “This ongoing catastrophe is not purely a natural disaster,” he said. “It is rather, and centrally, a politically-engineered social crime.”

A nine-minute video was shown, which explained the scale of the COVID-19 crisis and the criminality of governments that has caused it. Watch the video [here](#).

Julia Thomas, the HWRFC convenor and a member of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), said that the initiative for the public meeting arose out of a discussion in one of the rank-and-file committees. This was “an indication of the striving for united action by workers and the importance of these committees in advancing this fight.”

She described the Albanese Labor government’s ending of isolation requirements and paid pandemic leave as “a declaration of war against working people” and “the final stage in a protracted onslaught on any coordinated public health response to the pandemic in this country.”

As the virus rapidly spreads, driven by Omicron variants amid waning levels of vaccine immunity, the government has dismantled any remaining restrictions and sought to silence opponents of the “let it rip” program. Thomas said,

“A key role of rank-and-file committees is to mobilise workers to defend those who come under attack for exposing the truth.”

In July, the HWRFC launched a campaign defending Dr David Berger, a medical practitioner threatened with deregistration by AHPRA because of his vocal opposition to the “herd immunity” program and his condemnation of COVID misinformation on social media.

Thomas emphasised the critical role played by the trade unions in suppressing the mounting opposition among health workers to the degradation of their working conditions, exacerbated by the pandemic.

“To fight for their interests, workers must know who their friends and their enemies are,” she explained. “Your allies in these struggles are all workers, in this country and throughout the world. But you can’t fight with hands tied behind your backs. Workers must be independent from organisations that act as the policemen for governments and big business.”

For nurses coming into struggle in NSW and Victoria, the crucial next step is “to break from the union bureaucracy and form rank-and-file committees to develop demands based on what they actually need, not what management says is affordable.”

The second speaker, Katy Kinner, a nurse from California and member of the SEP (US), detailed the horrific conditions in emergency departments in American hospitals. She outlined many similar issues including understaffing, overwhelming workloads, privatisation of hospitals and poor wages that health workers in Australia confront.

“Mass anger exists among nurses,” Kinner said. “But the role of the committee is to raise the question of removing the profit motive from healthcare and fighting for socialism, because it is the capitalist system that is creating these unsafe conditions.”

Craig Wallace, a prominent disability activist and spokesperson for Australians Against COVID, spoke on the

devastating damage wreaked by the pandemic on disabled and immuno-compromised people.

Wallace said that the millions who have died of COVID-19 “have been sacrificed to a preventable disease which has been allowed to spread for reasons of profit, opportunism, lies, conspiracy, and political cowardice. This is social murder and it is eugenics. This is the slow homicide of the unwanted.”

In a detailed presentation, Wallace outlined a series of statistics substantiating this assessment. In Britain, sixty percent of COVID fatalities had been among people with a disability. They were three times more likely to perish from the virus than the general population.

Wallace stated: “I will be criticised for speaking here today, but I do not care because we are in a life-and-death struggle. In that struggle, disabled people should look, without reservations of any kind, to the political allies prepared to resist the sacrifice of our lives.”

The final speaker was Sue Phillips, a primary school teacher who is national convenor of the CFPE and a member of the SEP national committee. She pointed out that the CFPE published a statement in March 2020 calling for the closure of schools and the formation of action committees to defend the safety of educators, students and the wider community.

An essential component of the ruling class drive to reopen the economy and reverse lockdowns was the full reopening of schools. Phillips explained, “educators had to be forced back to face-to-face learning. This was key to the government’s strategy, not in the interests of educating children or their mental health, but to force their parents back into workplaces.”

Despite teachers’ willingness to fight, as shown by numerous votes to strike in Victoria, New South Wales and South Australia, these struggles were betrayed by the education unions, whose task was to enforce the “live with the virus” agenda.

Phillips described rank-and-file committees as “democratic organisations where decisions about safety and working conditions are not dictated from above, but democratically discussed and decided upon without the suppression and censorship of the unions and employers.” Such committees, coordinated globally, must organise “unified action in the schools, universities, hospitals and other medical workplaces against this new stage of COVID, aimed at advancing workers’ interests, putting lives before profit.”

A lively question-and-answer section followed, in which workers shared their experiences of the pandemic in schools and aged care facilities. Mandy, a CFPE member and Melbourne schoolteacher of 20 years, said “We can’t accept

this, and I absolutely agree that it’s up to the workers to take matters into their own hands.”

Questions were posed to Katy Kinner regarding what issues arose in the US rank-and-file committees, as well as the dangers facing nurses from repeated infection.

A significant expression of the meeting’s international character was the attendance of several leading members of education workers’ rank-and-file committees in other countries, some of whom submitted greetings to be read aloud at the meeting. They included Tania Kent from the UK, Dylan Lubao from Canada, and Renae Cassimeda and Steve Light from the US.

Steve Light, attending from New York City, thanked “the Australian healthcare and education rank-and-file workers for showing a way to unite, which can be a model to workers internationally and across economic sectors.”

Concluding remarks were then made by SEP national secretary Cheryl Crisp, who noted that an open, democratic discussion of the science of the pandemic was impossible at union meetings, and was only being provided by the SEP and grassroots organisations such as Australians Against COVID.

Crisp placed the discussion in the broader context of an historic breakdown of global capitalism, the drive towards nuclear war, and the offensive being waged by governments against the working class at home, in which the unions play a pivotal role.

“It is necessary to draw conclusions from what we have all been discussing, from the experiences that ordinary people have gone through, and they are political conclusions,” she said.

Before the meeting closed, Crisp encouraged those attending to “think very seriously about the need to join our party, to fight for the development of a society in which humanity can live, in which it is not confronted with the prospect of war, deprivation, and disease.”

Contact the Health Workers Rank-and-File Committee:

Email: sephw.aus@gmail.com

Twitter: @HealthRandF_Aus

Contact the Committee for Public Education:

Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com

Facebook: www.facebook.com/groups/opposeaeusellout/

Facebook: www.facebook.com/commforpubliceducation

Twitter: @CFPE_Australia



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact