

At Australian Education Union state conference:

Committee For Public Education members advance independent perspective in defence of educators, Julian Assange

Our reporters
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Members of the Committee For Public Education (CFPE), an organisation of rank and file teachers and part of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWARFC), advanced an independent perspective in defence of educators and school workers, and in opposition to the union apparatus, at an Australian Education Union (AEU) state conference held in Melbourne, July 29.

The conference, according to AEU documents, is nominally the organisation's "key decision-making forum, setting union policy and direction for the coming year." In reality, it typically functions as a stage-managed affair, with AEU officials ensuring their closest supporters attend as delegates, rubber stamping the bureaucracy's initiatives. This year its business was concluded in less than a day, ending with the endorsement of a statement from the branch council which ratified the AEU's agenda and repeatedly praised both the state and federal Labor governments.

The education policies of these governments have triggered an exodus of teachers from the sector, plunging the school system into an enormous crisis for educators, students and their parents. Intolerable workloads, oversized classes, the spread of COVID-19 throughout the education system, and the latest regressive wages agreement rammed through last year by the AEU bureaucracy that imposed a severe real wage cut, has resulted in mass resignations. Nearly 10,000 members have left the union in the previous 12 months, with total membership below 50,000.

In nominating for state conference, CFPE members issued a statement making clear their opposition to the Australian Education Union (AEU) apparatus: "The CFPE is standing delegates to state conference, not to join the highly paid AEU bureaucracy, nor to pursue a futile strategy of 'pressuring' the union leadership into defending the interests of educators. Rather, we are seeking to return power to the rank and file, developing a network of democratically-organised committees in every school to take forward a genuine struggle against the political establishment, including the [state] government of Premier Daniel Andrews, for a fully-funded public education system, with decent wages and working conditions for all staff."

For state conference, after the initial deadline for delegate nominations, less than 2 percent of all positions had been filled. Following an extension deadline, around 150 delegates attended the meeting, less than 20 percent of the total possible nominations across primary and secondary schools, the early childhood sector and TAFE (Technical and Further Education). A significant proportion of attending delegates, likely higher than one-third, were members of the AEU state council, which previously voted unanimously in favour of the four-year schools' industrial agreement that involves nominal wage rises of less than 2 percent a year, far below

inflation.

AEU apparatus versus the rank and file

The union bureaucracy's hostility to rank and file educators was made clear from the outset of proceedings.

Just four resolutions from the rank and file were put to the conference, with three of these initiated by CFPE members. These were emailed to conference delegates about a month earlier, but buried towards the end of a 129-page PDF document. The resolutions were not printed for distribution to delegates—unlike numerous other documents that were made available, such as a five-page draft AEU conference statement, a nine-page union secretary's report, and an 11-page report from an AEU-hired public relations firm.

When CFPE members objected to this before proceedings began, AEU state vice president Justin Mullaly (annual salary and benefits \$230,000) responded, "We have no intention of printing off your resolutions."

With the conference opening, CFPE members moved a procedural motion to re-organise the conference agenda, so that resolutions from school sub-branches and AEU regional meetings could be discussed sooner. "At a gathering of teachers and education support workers, the major item ought to be hearing the concerns of those who are involved directly in the education of children and youth," secondary school teacher Will Marshall explained to the conference.

The motion was lost, with around 15 delegates voting in favour. Two teacher delegates (not affiliated with the CFPE) then walked out in disgust, saying "shame" as they left the meeting.

One of the teachers, from an outer working-class secondary school, later told the *World Socialist Web Site*: "Credit to you guys—when that motion was put, it was the only time I felt there was a desire to establish genuine democracy. What's the saying—democracy dies in the darkness? Within the union, I don't feel there is genuine democracy. There are institutional power structures in place, and so any challenge has to be prepared to meet a counter-force."

There followed several hours of presentations from guest speakers—AEU federal president Correna Haythorpe (annual salary and benefits \$294,000) and Rachel Bos of the Australian Council of Trade Unions—and reports from state AEU officials.

The first discussion initiated from the rank and file was on a resolution on the schools' crisis and eroding real wages. This was moved by a teacher from a working-class school in the northern suburbs of Melbourne, who said he was not speaking in opposition to the union leadership, and merely wanted to include some reference in conference documents to the enormous crisis in the schools fuelled by excess workloads and staffing shortages. His suggestions were nevertheless voted

down—union officials made clear that not a single criticism of their record would be accepted.

The state conference then discussed three resolutions moved by CFPE members—one denouncing the wage cutting agreement, one on the COVID-19 pandemic and another on Julian Assange (for the full resolutions see here).

Moving the resolution on the 2022 Agreement, CFPE national convenor and teacher Sue Phillips emphasised the antidemocratic aspects of the ratification process, the impact of the imposed wage cut and the crisis in underfunded public schools.

She concluded: “A counter-offensive must put decision-making into the hands of ordinary teachers, out of the straitjacket of the union apparatus, with power back to the rank and file educators, who understand what is needed and what must be done. New democratic rank and file organisations need to be formed in every workplace—a network across schools that will fight for what is required to provide a free, high quality public education for all.”

Delegates opposing the resolution insisted falsely that significant gains in working conditions had been won through the Agreement. Another opponent denied there was any censorship on the AEU’s Facebook page. This is a blatant lie, as countless union members can attest to, after having seen their comments critical of the union leadership immediately deleted.

The resolution was defeated when put to the vote. Also lost was the resolution on COVID-19, which centred on the demand that the AEU survey its membership to determine the extent of infection, instances of Long COVID and other effects of the pandemic.

That resolution was opposed by supporters of the AEU leadership on spurious grounds. One delegate insisted absurdly that such data could not be collected because other data sets did not exist, and therefore comparisons would not be able to be made.

That the union apparatus refuses to gather basic information on the extent of the pandemic’s impact on the school system underscores its collaboration on this issue with state and federal governments since the beginning of 2020. Throughout Australia, at every stage of the pandemic, the teacher unions have enforced government diktats, including school reopenings amid inadequate vaccination rates and mitigation measures, working to block any independent initiatives to defend the health and safety of school staff and students.

Free Julian Assange resolution passed

The final CFPE resolution discussed at state conference was that demanding the immediate freedom of WikiLeaks’ editor and antiwar journalist Julian Assange.

The original resolution was earlier passed at several schools and three regional meetings covering educators across much of Melbourne’s northern and western working-class suburbs. It included the following: “We demand that the Labor government of Prime Minister Anthony Albanese *end its collaboration with the drive to railroad Assange into the US courts and instead* use all its diplomatic and other powers to secure his immediate and unconditional release.”

The AEU’s Justin Mullaly moved an amendment to remove the italicised passage above. The proposed deletion of this important part of the resolution reflected the union bureaucracy’s desperate efforts to both cover up the Albanese government’s share of responsibility for the witch-hunt against Assange, and to prevent any disruption of the AEU’s intimate relationship with the Labor Party.

Mullaly falsely declared that there was “no evidence,” to back up allegations that Albanese was collaborating with the attempted prosecution.

CFPE members spoke and voted against the amendment. Primary school teacher Patrick O’Connor explained that successive Labor and Liberal-National governments had in fact actively collaborated with the witch-hunt against Assange—beginning in 2010, when then Labor Prime Minister

Julia Gillard falsely asserted that WikiLeaks’ publication of leaked US military material, including evidence of war crimes in Iraq, was “illegal.” O’Connor added that the Albanese government had done nothing to act in Assange’s defence, as confirmed with the publication of internal documents from the government’s attorney-general’s department.

The union’s amendment was nevertheless carried. After this, the amended resolution was endorsed by the state conference, with only two votes in opposition (cast by delegates who opposed defending Assange from a right-wing standpoint).

The CFPE’s submission of its resolution marked another contribution in its years’ long fight to mobilise teachers and school workers in defence of Julian Assange. This record stands in sharp contrast to the Australian Education Union, which both in Victoria and federally, has said and done precisely nothing to defend Assange. Four days after the state conference the union bureaucracy emailed a bulletin to members that included a “conference recap,” making no mention whatsoever of the Assange resolution. This underscores that the adoption of the watered-down resolution was not the occasion for any change in the AEU’s role in terms of the defence of Assange.

At the conference, another issue raised by AEU officials and the ACTU guest speaker was the Labor government’s proposed indigenous “Voice” to parliament, which is being put to a referendum later this year. For the unions, promoting a “yes” vote is aimed at providing themselves with a progressive gloss. Exploiting the widespread and deeply felt opposition among workers and youth to the continued oppression of the Aboriginal people, the unions are joining the Labor Party and Greens in seeking to divert these sentiments into support for a toothless and unelected advisory body. The Voice, if enacted, will do nothing to improve the living conditions of ordinary Aboriginal people.

Overall, the AEU’s state conference served as a demonstration of the gulf that separates the interests and priorities of the union bureaucracy from those of ordinary educators in the schools and early childhood and TAFE sectors.

Summing up the CFPE’s experience, Sue Phillips told the *World Socialist Web Site*: “There was a definite air of unreality at the conference, where the intolerable conditions of educators in the schools was suppressed. Only the CFPE expressed the concerns of the 20,000 educators, nearly 40 percent of the membership, who last year voted ‘no’ to the agreement and now have resigned in their thousands from the union.”

She added: “It is clear the AEU bureaucracy’s anti-public education agenda will be continued in the next period. What was apparent is that the union apparatus cannot tolerate one iota of criticism of its role and that of the Labor government. This is an expression not of its strength but its weakness—such a bureaucratic apparatus cannot be reformed or pressured to change course. I encourage all educators seeking an alternative to contact us and develop a discussion on the development of rank-and-file committees.”

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