

Australia: Committee for Public Education holds online meeting to unite educators, workers and students against the assault on public education

Our reporter
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The Committee for Public Education (CFPE) held an important meeting on Sunday, March 23, titled, “Build Rank-and-File Committees, Oppose the Accelerating Assault on Public Education!”

Educators, students, and workers attended the meeting, from across Australia and internationally. The reports and discussions outlined the crisis in public education and emphasised the urgent need for educators to form independent organisations of struggle to counter the widening attacks on public education and democratic rights.

The meeting was chaired by Patrick O’Connor, a public-school teacher and member of the Socialist Equality Party’s National Committee. O’Connor introduced the discussion by referencing the CFPE’s 2025 statement, which detailed the unprecedented crisis in Australian public education. He outlined key analyses from the statement, emphasising the necessity of forming rank-and-file committees to unite teachers, educators, families, and working-class supporters of public education.

The opening report was delivered by Renae Cassimeda, a Californian teacher and regular writer for the *World Socialist Web Site*. Cassimeda’s report focused on the deepening crisis in public education and democratic rights under the fascist Trump administration and the necessity for the working class to challenge capitalism fighting for an internationalist socialist program. She highlighted the global nature of the education crisis, orchestrated by ruling elites to divert vast social resources into the hands of the financial oligarchy while preparing for a third world war.

Cassimeda detailed the devastating cuts to education programs since Trump’s inauguration, particularly the closure of the US Department of Education by executive order. She explained: “The attack on education is part of a broader assault on social, political, and constitutional rights, with immigrant families living in fear of deportation and democratic rights under siege, particularly on university campuses, where

students and staff speaking out against genocide face repression.”

Cassimeda said that the unions are telling educators to focus on begging and letter writing campaigns to appeal to the representatives of the financial oligarchy. The aim is to prevent nationwide strikes and ensure that the deepening opposition to the Trump administration is straitjacketed.

The speaker emphasised the bipartisan nature of the attacks, referencing the support in the Senate by the Democrats for: “An Enabling act which essentially gives Trump and Elon Musk a blank cheque to slash social programs, purge federal employees and lay the groundwork for a police state.”

The crisis in world capitalism, she explained, is fuelling a social counterrevolution, making extreme inequality incompatible with democracy. The ruling class understands that an educated population threatens its interests, which is why, under Trump, schools are being transformed from centres of learning into hubs of fascist and religious indoctrination, with critical thinking and culture under attack.

She cited Thomas Jefferson, who famously argued that “an educated populace is the most effective defence against tyranny.” Universal public education, a core ideal of the Enlightenment, has long been seen as essential to democracy and a safeguard against authoritarianism. The historic rights that the working class has fought for are being eroded. Young people’s future and the very social right to a public education and for an educated population are at stake.

The second report was delivered by Sue Phillips, CFPE national convenor, teacher, and long-standing SEP National Committee member. Phillips described public education as “a system crumbling under the weight of deliberate neglect, political expediency, and escalating policies aimed at privatisation and integrating schools and universities into the demands of business and the war machine.”

She emphasised that the Trump agenda is not an aberration but part of an international process already unfolding in

Australia. Policies from both Labor and Liberal governments have deliberately funnelled students and funding into private schools, creating a semi-privatised, socially segregated system that is deeply inequitable. Australia now has one of the highest rates of private school enrolment in the OECD, with more than 40 percent of secondary students attending private institutions. A 2024 OECD report found that Australia spends 0.7 percent of its gross domestic product on private education—more than double the OECD average of 0.3 percent.

With child poverty on the rise, many working-class families are struggling to make ends meet, leading to economic stress, frustration, and alienation that can spill over into the school environment. More families are relying on school charities and even taking out loans to afford basic materials like uniforms, books and excursions.

Phillips explained the terrible situation in schools with untenable workloads, increasing class sizes and a lack of much needed resources. This was the result of decades of sell-out agreements by the teacher unions who have worked loyally with every state and federal government.

Phillips addressed the issue of increasing violence in schools, noting that its causes are complex and tied to broader social factors such as inequality, poverty and the normalisation of violence and war. She explained, “Every day, students enter our classrooms carrying the weight of capitalist society. Beyond school, the world is engulfed in war, genocide and political bullying at the highest levels of government.”

Phillips concluded by calling on teachers, students and workers to join the CFPE and establish rank-and-file committees in workplaces, stating: “The time for half-measures and reliance on the failing union apparatus is over. The future of public education, the well-being of our educators and the prospects of our children depend on our willingness to take bold and independent action. The future is in our hands.”

During the discussion following the reports, Cassimeda responded to questions by elaborating on the curricula changes being implemented by Trump. She provided examples of attacks on public education by both Democratic and Republican administrations, detailing the assault on public education including under Obama and Biden.

A high school teacher in regional Australia spoke about the rise in school violence, explaining that before the pandemic, police were never called to his school, but now it is a regular occurrence, with students bringing weapons and threatening harm. He noted that children—and even their parents—have lived their entire lives in a state of war, normalizing violence.

At the end of the meeting, two resolutions were unanimously adopted. The first resolution, moved by secondary teacher and SEP member Will Marshall, called for the mobilisation of the working class in defence of its democratic rights to oppose war and to defend all those victimised for speaking out against the genocide rejecting the lie that opposition to Zionist war crimes is antisemitic. In particular, the resolution declared support for

anti-genocide activist Randa Abdel-Fattah an outspoken critic of Zionism and academic from Macquarie University who has been subjected to an extended witch hunt and has now had her research funding frozen after intervention by the federal Labor government.

The resolution also endorsed a previous resolution passed by the US Educators Rank-and-File Committee and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality that demanded the immediate release of Mahmoud Khalil and all university students and workers persecuted by the Trump administration for exercising their right to free speech against the US-backed Israeli genocide in Gaza.

The final resolution was moved by Cheryl Crisp, SEP (Australia) national secretary. In speaking to the resolution, she explained the background to the ban on the SEP standing candidates in federal elections with its party name on the ballot, despite it having met all of the onerous requirements. This underlined the fear in the ruling elites, desperate to impose an array of anti-democratic measures to block a political movement in the working class fighting for a socialist and internationalist perspective.

The resolution stated:

This meeting of the CFPE condemns and calls for the immediate reversal of the rejection by the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) of the Socialist Equality Party’s application for official party registration, despite the SEP meeting all the onerous requirements.

Under Australia’s anti-democratic electoral laws, the AEC decision, unless overturned, means that the SEP’s candidates for the imminent federal election will not have the party’s name on the ballot papers.

That will deny the SEP’s fundamental democratic right to advance its socialist alternative against the entire political establishment and its agenda of genocide, war and austerity.

It will also deny voters of their right to identify, on the ballot papers, the only party that is fighting to mobilise the working class as part of the struggle to develop a unified international anti-war movement based on a socialist program.

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