Australian teachers defy union and vote for immediate school closures over coronavirus

By the Committee For Public Education
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At least half of the staff at Footscray City College—some 50 teachers—voted yesterday to resign en masse from the Australian Education Union (AEU) if it takes no action to close down the school system over the threat to staff and students posed by the coronavirus pandemic. The college is a major secondary school in the inner-western, working-class suburbs of Melbourne, Australia’s second largest city and the capital of the state of Victoria.

Regardless of what the union does or does not do, the resolution also called for the teachers’ designated health and safety (HSU) representatives to immediately “pin” both campuses of the school as an “unsafe” workplace, requiring an immediate shutdown.

The meeting overwhelmingly supported a second resolution, moved by Will Marshall, a longstanding teacher at the school and member of the Committee For Public Education (CFPE), for the immediate formation of a workplace Committee of Action at Footscray City College, independent of the AEU.

The resolution tasked the workplace committee with “reaching out to parents to support a common unified campaign of action.” It decided that “these resolutions, including pinning schools, be circulated to all schools across the state, calling for the urgent establishment of committees of action in every school.”

The meeting and vote at Footscray City took place just hours after the federal Liberal-National Coalition government of Prime Minister Scott Morrison, with the full backing of all Coalition and Labor Party state and territory governments, declared that there would be no closure of schools in Australia due to its impact on the broader economy.

Attempting to blackmail teachers and parents into accepting the potential infection of tens of thousands of people through the school system, Morrison asserted that up to 30 percent of health and emergency workers would have to leave their posts to care for their children in the event of closures, or that at-risk elderly grandparents would have to provide care.

The COVID-19 outbreak serves only to underscore that workers must take matters into their own hands. The federal and state governments, along with their union collaborators, have only one concern: maintaining the profitability of business in the face of an enveloping global economic crisis. Workers have to assert their own class interests and social rights.

The teachers at Footscray stressed that the closure of the school system must be combined with unconditional income support for all workers, many of whom would have to stay at home to take care of their children. They discussed the need for the universal provision of childcare services, especially for workers in health, emergency services and other essential sectors.

The decisive stand of the Footscray teachers should be taken up and followed at schools across Australia and internationally. The trade unions have demonstrated over decades that they are not workers’ organisations, but agencies of the government and corporations.

The working class cannot defend any of its democratic and social rights through the framework of the unions. New organisations must be established, starting with rank-and-file committees in every workplace, that are open to all workers, regardless of whether they are union members or not, and whether they are employed on full-time, part-time, casual or contract conditions.

The CFPE issued a statement yesterday that should be read, discussed and debated at every school across Australia: “Close Australian schools to stave off...
coronavirus! Form action committees of teachers and school staff!”

The statement outlined the following policies for consideration by Action Committees that are established at schools and in working-class communities:

* For as long as schools and universities remain open, they must become centres of mass coronavirus testing, for children, families, teachers, students, and school workers.

* The closure of the country’s school system must be preceded by guarantees of 100 percent income protection for every person who is compelled to stay at home to mind their children.

* Free and high-quality computer and internet access must be guaranteed to every family to ensure that accessibility to online learning provisions is not dependent on wealth. Any household without internet access or an individual computer for each student in the home must be provided with these basic rights immediately, without charge.

* Publicly-funded psychologists and other health professionals must be made available to children at risk from the disruption and potential trauma of their interrupted education.

* Guaranteed income must be provided to all education workers during what could be an extended closure, including all graduate teachers without sick and long service leave, casual relief teachers, all education support staff, and contract staff.

The statement asserted the class standpoint that the “guiding principle must be that the shutdown of the education system to minimise the spread of the coronavirus is not an individual or a family-based responsibility, but a social responsibility.”

Socialist policies, starting with working-class control over the banks and major corporations, must be implemented on a world scale. The CFPE and SEP urge all workers to take up the fight for an independent political movement of the working class for international socialism.

Teachers and education workers can contact the CFPE via email at cfpe.aus@gmail.com or on our Facebook page: www.facebook.com/commforpubliceducation/. The CFPE Twitter account is https://twitter.com/CFPE_Australia.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

http://www.wsws.org