

Australia: Why Victorian teachers should vote “no” to the AEU-Labor government agreement

Statement by the Socialist Equality Party
20 June 2008

Teachers are set to vote in schools throughout Victoria next week on whether to accept or reject the Australian Education Union (AEU) and state Labor government’s proposed industrial agreement that will determine wages and conditions in the public education system for the next three years. The Socialist Equality Party calls on all teachers to take a stand and vote “no”. Such a vote must mark the first stage of a coordinated industrial and political campaign in defence not only of teachers’ wages and conditions but the public education system as a whole—a campaign that directly poses the need for a struggle against both the AEU and Labor.

The union is presenting the state-wide secret ballot as a foregone conclusion, a mere formality. Next week’s vote is a legal requirement under federal industrial relations legislation. If it were simply up to the bureaucracy, teachers would not be able to directly vote on the agreement at all. The AEU has aggressively opposed demands for a mass meeting to be held, through which teachers could openly cast a fully informed vote after a democratic discussion and debate.

The AEU has attempted to persuade teachers that democracy has been served and the agreement already ratified through the union-convened delegates’ meetings held over the past weeks. On June 13, the union announced that 1,508 delegates (89 percent) had reportedly voted in favour of the agreement versus 186 (11 percent) opposed. A total of 68 percent of allocated ballots were cast—a record high.

This purported outcome in no way reflects the depth of opposition among teachers to the deal. In 2004, for example, some 22 percent voted against ratification of the three-year agreement—despite the fact that there was very little overt opposition at the time among ordinary teachers. This time round, the depth and breadth of oppositional sentiment has been impossible to deny, expressed through emails, blogs, and social networking sites as well as in discussions within schools and between union sub-branches.

No teacher should feel obliged to vote “yes” in next week’s ballot out of respect for the delegates’ vote. Some teachers have raised the possibility that the AEU directly rigged the delegates’ meetings ballot. While this cannot be excluded, far more likely is that such a thing proved unnecessary. From the outset, the union deliberately organised the meetings to exclude the participation of ordinary teachers and deliver the desired result. In an email to the *World Socialist Web Site*, one senior teacher wrote: “I had strongly requested that I wished to speak at the ratification meeting and was given a verbal OK. I did not receive notification of the [Horsham] meeting (last Thursday); it was advertised through the email system, of which it seems, I was the only one not on the DL. Suffice to say, I missed the meeting and the opportunity to present the opposing side. Others who had attended the meeting, and felt betrayed by the AEU campaign, felt there was little choice but to support the proposed agreement.”

Moreover, the delegates, each supposedly representing 20 union members, were selected on an entirely ad hoc and arbitrary basis. In some schools there was no sub-branch meeting or vote to select delegates, and the established, pro-agreement union representatives simply appointed themselves. In other schools, where only a marginal majority of teachers voted in favour, every delegate was bound to vote for the agreement, effectively disenfranchising large minorities in these schools.

In another measure aimed at outright intimidation, the vote was conducted at each meeting by delegates placing their card in either the “yes” or “no” box—with their name on the card! So this was a “secret ballot”—for everyone except the union officials, who no doubt kept a record of all those who failed to toe the line.

Delegates were encouraged to simply cast their vote without staying for the meeting, or participating in the extremely limited debate permitted by the union. Interestingly, those few meetings where SEP members or supporters were able to ask questions or speak in opposition to the deal recorded a significantly higher “no” vote.

No teacher should be under any illusion—if the agreement is ratified it will mark a serious defeat for the year-long industrial campaign.

Throughout the campaign, which included two mass meetings and a series of rolling stop-work protests, teachers won broad support from wide sections of the population. Central demands included a 30 percent pay rise over three years, no more than 20 students per class, and the establishment of permanent positions for those teachers on contracts who now comprise one-fifth of the total workforce. Yet the AEU-Labor deal delivers none of these demands. Instead, first-year and senior teachers receive a nominal pay increase that barely matches the official inflation rate, while everyone else will take a significant real wage cut. Amid escalating interest rates, house prices, rental rates, costs of groceries, transport, and many other necessities, teachers living standards—already substantially lower than those of most workers with comparable qualifications—will be driven down even further.

The impact of the agreement will soon be directly felt in classrooms throughout Victoria. Class sizes will remain unmanageable, and schools will continue to be understaffed. The agreement explicitly endorses the government’s right-wing “productivity”-based education “Blueprint”, in which underperforming schools will be further starved of funds, forced to close or amalgamate, and it introduces new classifications of teachers such as “executive class”—a means of smuggling in a form of performance pay. Ratification of the deal will serve to formally entrench this agenda, policed by the AEU.

The AEU, the Labor Party, and the political tasks confronting teachers

A number of teachers who oppose the agreement have nevertheless said they intend to vote “yes” because they feel nothing better can be achieved given the AEU’s refusal to mount a campaign against the government.

The union has stopped at nothing to cultivate this sentiment. That is why AEU Victorian President Mary Bluett publicly kissed Premier John Brumby in gratitude and hailed the agreement as the best achieved in 25 years. The state's teachers, she crowed, would now be the best paid in the country. These fraudulent claims—made more than a week before teachers were even permitted to read the agreement—were faithfully repeated by every section of the media, leading the public to believe that the teachers' central demands had been met. This outcome was no "misunderstanding", but rather a deliberate attempt by Bluett and her colleagues to present teachers with a *fait accompli*. The agreement cannot now be rejected, the union has repeatedly claimed, because a "no" vote would appear greedy and cost teachers the support won throughout their industrial campaign.

The AEU leadership has also threatened that the Brumby government would respond to any rejection of the agreement by invoking the former Howard government's WorkChoices legislation, as it did with the state's nurses—halting negotiations, making illegal any further industrial action, and instructing the arbitration courts to determine the outcome. This would lead, the AEU insists, to the courts imposing a significantly worse settlement. The only realistic and rational course of action, therefore, is to endorse the agreement.

The logic of the union's position is that teachers are obliged, every three years, to simply shut up and swallow whatever deal the bureaucracy cooks up with the government, regardless of what measures are actually contained within it.

Teachers must not permit themselves to be intimidated by these threats. In the first place, it is not true that teachers would lose public support if they voted "no". Such an outcome—combined with a campaign explaining the true character of the proposed deal and exposing the union-government-media barrage of misinformation—could in fact develop into a focal point for the escalating opposition among working people to the bipartisan assault on public education, social services and living conditions that has unfolded over the past two decades.

Secondly, the spectre of WorkChoices and judicial arbitration only underscores the necessity for teachers to break out of the union-driven impasse and develop an independent political struggle against the state and federal Labor governments.

Brumby's threats, delivered by the AEU bureaucracy on his behalf, highlight the right-wing, pro-business character of his administration and again point to the absence of any fundamental differences between Labor and Liberal.

For the federal Labor government of Prime Minister Kevin Rudd—whose election the AEU vigorously supported last November—the Victorian teachers' struggle is a crucial stage in its ongoing efforts to place the burden of the economic crisis squarely on the backs of the working class. Amid a growing crisis in the global economy, with the US in recession and the world's financial markets hit by a "credit crunch", Rudd has responded to corporate demands about inflation by pledging to suppress workers' wages. No less than three senior federal Labor ministers immediately responded to the announced teachers' agreement

by assuring business, and the Murdoch press, that no "wages breakout" would be tolerated. Finance Minister Lindsay Tanner later admitted that the true nature of the teachers' deal was very different to the one touted by the AEU and state government in their "presentation for general public consumption".

The AEU functions as the conscious agent of the Brumby and Rudd governments, and the ruthless enforcer of their drive to achieve productivity benchmarks and "international competitiveness" by undermining public education and driving down teachers' salaries. No amount of pressure from below will alter this relationship—which is why the alternative to ratifying the agreement is not, as some have argued, forcing the union to renegotiate a better outcome. It is necessary to speak plainly—as long as teachers remain trapped within such a futile trade unionist framework they are doomed to face further defeats.

That is why a "no" vote in next week's ballot must mark the first salvo in an open rebellion against the AEU and the Labor Party. The Socialist Equality Party calls on teachers to elect rank-and-file committees of trusted teachers to advance their campaign, bypass the union's bureaucratic structures, and break down the imposed divisions between schools and union sub-branches, and between teachers in various states. That Victorian teachers remain largely uninformed about the industrial campaigns currently being waged by teachers in New South Wales, South Australia, Western Australia, and the Northern Territory for better pay and conditions stands as an indictment of the AEU's efforts to isolate them. The unification of these struggles should coincide with a turn by teachers to other sections of the working class fighting to defend their wages and conditions, including Qantas engineers, Holden car workers, and NSW power workers fighting the state Labor government's privatisation drive.

This campaign can only go forward to the extent that it is based on a new and independent political orientation. Contained within the Victorian teachers' dispute is a fundamental question: what should be the determining basis, and the daily priorities, of economic and social life? Should the enormous productive capacities and technological resources of the world economy continue to be guided by the profit motive and utilised for the benefit of a tiny minority, or should they to be harnessed to serve the social needs of the vast majority? Is public education to remain an under-resourced, second-rate system reserved for those whose parents are unable to afford private schooling, and whose central task is simply to provide students with the skills demanded by business—or should billions of dollars be spent to ensure a free, universally accessible, quality school system that gives all children the opportunity to fully develop their talents, capacities, and interests?

The latter alternative is incompatible with the dictates of big business and the "free market". It requires nothing less than the revolutionary reorganisation of society along socialist lines. There are no easy solutions or short-cuts. We encourage teachers—and all workers—to study the history and program of the Socialist Equality Party and make the decision to fight for its growth and development as the new mass party of the working class.

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To contact the Socialist Equality Party
E-mail: sep@sep.org.au **Telephone:** 03 9329 7711