

Australian Education Union conference underscores its own irrelevance

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The Victorian branch of the Australian Education Union, (AEU) held its annual state conference last month, purportedly to discuss the major issues facing teachers and the crisis in public education. Instead, the conference was testimony to the decline of the union and its inability and unwillingness to respond to the deepening attacks on public education and the conditions of its members.

A continual exodus of members from the AEU, presently around 500 per year, has been underway for several years. At the end of 1997 for instance, after five years of a sustained offensive by the Liberal government on education, the union's Victorian branch membership had declined by over 40 percent, the worst decline of any state branch.

With some 27,000 members, the Victorian branch could muster only 150 delegates to its conference. There were 56 teachers from the entire metropolitan and rural membership, the majority of delegates being union councillors. A decade ago, the Technical Teachers Union, (just one of the unions that went on to amalgamate into the AEU), with some 10,000 members held conferences attended by around 350 delegates, who hotly debated dozens of resolutions. There were times when the conference had to be extended from two to three days to deal with all the matters under discussion.

In marked contrast, the recent conference demonstrated the irrelevance that the union has become in the daily lives of the majority of its membership. No school sent in any resolutions for discussion. As the conference agenda stated, "If the Branch Executive did not submit business for conference in 1999 then we would have had nothing to discuss!" The AEU went on to admit: "Currently we hold an annual Branch Conference because one is stipulated in our Rules, but

has any detailed consideration been given to what actual purpose it serves? ... Resolutions have to be drafted to ensure there is something to discuss, the input from sub-branches has practically ceased..."

This lack of participation from the schools provides an indication of the amount of open discussion taking place in union branches—almost none. The union provides no channel at all for critical analysis or dissent. Few union branches even meet, and when they do, the discussion never deals with any of the broader educational issues.

But this decline in membership participation found no reflection in the president's opening address. Instead, with a mixture of smugness and self congratulation, AEU president Mary Bluett concluded her speech saying: "This Annual Conference provides us with an opportunity to build upon our past achievements and to confirm our commitment to a strongly resourced public education system that meets the needs of all students and recognises the significant contribution of AEU members to the process of education as we move into the next millenium".

Contrary to such bureaucratic boasting, the dire situation facing public education is rapidly worsening. The AEU itself revealed in a recent survey that one third of secondary teachers teach subjects for which they have no qualifications, while nearly half the public schools have unqualified teachers taking language lessons. Compounding this, more than 20 per cent of students enrolled in Victorian schools hail from non-English speaking backgrounds. Things are particularly bad in the poorer areas. There, some 20 per cent of school children skip class, according to a Federal Government program that deals with chronic truants. Children as young as ten years of age stay away, with some not having been enrolled at any school for a year.

Attempts to overcome such problems are stymied because, as figures from 1992-1997 reveal, there has been a 40 per cent cut in the number of Special Needs teachers, whose role is to assist children requiring extra help.

What can be said about an organisation that “confirms” its “commitment to a well-resourced education system”, but remains silent about the growing number of children being denied even minimal levels of schooling? Or about the hundreds of primary schools that have more than 30 eight-year-olds per class because of cuts to teacher numbers?

One of the union leaders followed Bluett's remarks with the claim that the union was currently “winning” in its battle against the implementation of Self Governing Schools, (SGS). The Kennett government, she remarked, had only managed to involve 51 schools in the program.

Her claim flies in the face of reality. "Self Governing Schools", is a program that gives local school councils the power to hire and fire teachers, replacing centralised employment. Self-Governing status forces schools to enter into sponsorship deals with companies to gain access to badly-needed funds. Having brought forward the date for the next group of schools to become part of the SGS program, Education minister Phil Gude announced that the government intends to target 900 schools for the scheme. First announced in 1997, the program is rapidly accelerating.

Two members of the Socialist Equality Party exposed the AEU's acquiescence to SGS, and called for the convening of an emergency mass meeting of all teachers to discuss the issues involved. At Blackburn High School, for example, where a union branch took action for a week against SGS, the union isolated their struggle and it ended in defeat. Now the government is proceeding unabated and expects 200 schools to come under SGS status by the end of the year. This will create a critical mass, obliging other schools to apply, or face being starved of funds.

Declaring that local school struggles had been successful, AEU Secondary Vice President Brian Henderson opposed the SEP motion. With no further discussion, the meeting agreed with him.

The conference also underscored the extent of the AEU's abandonment of its own membership. During the past five years, the Kennett government has

implemented legislation aimed at intimidating teaching staff and silencing opposition. Many teachers have faced unsubstantiated allegations of incompetence or wrongdoing, and then been hauled through an inquiry process that denies them the most basic civil rights.

Responding to an SEP motion demanding that the case of victimised and sacked teacher Geraldine Rawson be discussed, AEU officials replied that the matter was not a priority. Branch Secretary Rob Glare argued that since Rawson—a union member for 30 years—was not a union member at the time the allegations were made against her, it was unnecessary to discuss the case any further.

Less than an hour later, however, Glare dismissed discussion of the victimisation of another teacher, Alison Thorne, who was sacked in 1997 while she was president of her local union branch and involved in a union work to rule campaign.

Union lawyers, Glare noted, had reviewed the case and saw little chance of a successful outcome. That being so, the AEU had decided to end all financial support for her defence. Again, the meeting overwhelmingly supported the official position.

A union report, handed out to conference delegates, revealed that as a result of “new procedures for the management of legal cases” the union had “reduced spending on legal fees” by \$292,486. Instead of hiring lawyers, the AEU had moved to utilising its “own staff expertise”.

The continual loss of dues paying members has seen an ongoing financial crisis. As a result, the union imposed a \$100 levy, on top of fees, to pay for its various publicity campaigns. Branch Secretary Rob Glare lamented that 42 per cent of members had failed to respond. In other words, were the constitution to be followed to the letter, the AEU would lose nearly half of its already reduced membership.



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