

Australia: An eyewitness account of a Victorian teachers' union ratification meeting

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The World Socialist Web Site received the following report from a teacher and Socialist Equality Party supporter who attended an Australian Education Union-convened delegates' meeting at Melbourne's Eltham High School, on Thursday, June 12. The meeting was the last of a series of such meetings held over two weeks to secure ratification of the AEU's sell-out industrial agreement negotiated with the state Labor government of Premier John Brumby (See "Victorian teachers' union convenes delegates' meetings to ram through industrial agreement").

The proposed deal—which amounts to a real wage cut for many teachers and will further worsen classroom conditions—has generated widespread anger and opposition among teachers.

Just five delegates' meetings were staged in Melbourne, with others held in regional Victoria. The union deliberately held the meetings on school days in the afternoon in order to restrict the number of ordinary teachers able to attend. Delegates were selected on an arbitrary, ad hoc, and sometimes entirely antidemocratic manner. At a number of the delegates' meetings, members and supporters of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) attempted to move a resolution calling for mass meetings to be held in order to allow teachers to cast an informed vote on the proposed agreement after a full democratic discussion, but union officials repeatedly ruled this "out of order".

When I arrived at Eltham High with a friend, teachers were queuing up to enter the hall. There were probably between 100 to 150 people in attendance. We began to distribute SEP leaflets ("Demand mass meetings to reject Victorian teachers' union sell-out!") which explained that the proposed agreement was a betrayal that the union bureaucracy was attempting to impose by concealing its real content, stifling open discussion among teachers, and intimidating opposition. Teachers were grabbing our leaflets en masse—very few failed to take one.

I had conversations with several teachers. One dominating sentiment that I noticed was indignation at the injustice of the inequality entrenched within the agreement. One older teacher told me that while she personally gained from the deal, she would vote against it because "we went on strike for all teachers", and it was not fair that only a few should benefit. She also explained how angry the teachers at her school had been when [AEU Victorian President] Mary Bluett kissed Brumby on the day when the union proclaimed the agreement as an "historic victory". The teachers understood very well that this was done in order to undermine any opposition that might arise. However, this teacher was confident that if they could explain publicly the reasons why they opposed the agreement, reveal how it had addressed none of their burning concerns, then the community would continue to extend its sympathy to their struggle.

I also spoke to several teachers from Eltham High School who

strongly opposed the agreement. They were absolutely clear that it represented a wage cut in real terms for most teachers.

As we entered the hall, we observed that the union officials were forcing delegates to register and then cast their votes *before any discussion took place*. Later, we learned that the registration process was the means through which the union could identify those delegates who had cast their votes against the agreement. Such a system resembled the electoral practices of a totalitarian regime.

The meeting began with a "report" from the bureaucrat [AEU Victorian Secretary] Brian Henderson. The report was a barrage of figures and interminable rambling about petty details and insignificant concessions. For example, the bureaucrats announced triumphantly that they had succeeded in negotiating a reduced hiring fee on laptop computers for government teachers. In response to this "great deal on laptops", one teacher yelled out angrily: "But we shouldn't have to pay for laptops at all—they should be provided to us as an essential part of our teaching!" This comment was greeted with all round applause.

A little later, one teacher gave vent to his frustration, yelling out: "This is not a report!" He was referring to what was evident to all—Henderson was not trying to provide teachers with clear, accurate information, but instead was hoping to smother them with the union's pro-agreement propaganda. When Henderson addressed the issue of wage increases, this same teacher interjected: "Liars!"

Finally, after perhaps 15 minutes of Henderson monopolising the microphone, a delegate from Bundoora Secondary College raised a point of order. Ann Taylor, one of the presiding bureaucrats, tried to silence him but was forced to allow him to speak after other teachers defended their colleague. The delegate stood up and demanded to know when Henderson was going to finish. Indignantly, he articulated the prevailing sentiment: this was supposed to be a delegates' discussion, so when were the delegates going to get the opportunity to speak? "I am wondering about the timing here," he said. "How much longer is this report going to go on for?"

Taylor then insisted that because it was an extremely complex agreement, going through the various provisions would be an unavoidably lengthy process. But the delegate was not satisfied with this response—he demanded to know exactly how many minutes longer Henderson intended to speak. Other teachers yelled out their support for the delegate's opposition to the obvious attempts at suppressing discussion. Taylor was again forced to retreat; she said that she believed that the report would be finished in a few minutes.

Henderson continued for perhaps another 10 minutes. When he announced yet another "victory" in the agreement—that contract teachers would now receive holiday pay—there was angry heckling from all quarters. One teacher yelled out: "Yeah, but they still don't have a permanent job."

At the conclusion of the union's "report", questions and comments

were taken from the floor.

The teacher who had earlier called the assembled bureaucrats liars was allowed to speak. He told the meeting that he had used the union's own figures to calculate the wage outcomes from the deal and could prove that the claimed increases were utterly false. His allegations were summarily dismissed by Henderson.

Another teacher described how disappointed she and her fellow union members felt about the agreement because of its divisive nature. The fact that most teachers were going to be limited to the Brumby government's wage policy, while a few would enjoy certain gains immediately, was tearing the union branch at her school apart. Another teacher referred to the terrible atmosphere that was bound to develop in schools. "How would you feel, when the teacher next to you is going to be earning \$10,000 less than you, as a result of this deal?" she asked. "What kind of relations will this create?"

The union officials attempted to answer this by "lamenting" the fact that it has always been the case that benefits cannot be spread uniformly, and "of course" their hands had been tied in the negotiations by the wages policy of Premier John Brumby's government. A teacher then yelled out: "But why should we accept the Brumby government's wage policy?" This comment was greeted with widespread calls of approval and applause from all over the hall. Bluett, obviously sensing political danger, attempted to backtrack. "We did not accept the Brumby government's wage policy," she declared. "Instead, we adopted a mechanism to go around it." She then claimed that the deal involved \$650 million more than the Labor government had originally offered, but did not explain why then no additional money had been allocated in the state budget to the education department as a result of the agreement.

Clearly, an important change has occurred. Bluett had tried to put the union's old line that it is impossible for teachers, and the working class as a whole, to go beyond what the government can afford. She was visibly taken aback by the Eltham meeting's challenge to this position.

After allowing some time for questions from the floor, the officials called for delegates to come to the front to speak for or against the agreement. There were four or five teachers who wished to speak—all against. However, under the bureaucratic rules governing the meeting, only four speakers in total were permitted to speak and there had to be two in favour and two against. It is highly indicative of the prevailing mood that *no one* from the floor was prepared to address the meeting in favour of the agreement. Instead, the bureaucracy itself was forced to directly participate in the "debate", with both Bluett and Henderson (not again!!) putting the case why teachers ought to vote "yes".

One of the teachers speaking against the agreement was the delegate from Bundoora Secondary College. Replying to another teacher's concern that the agreement would make it virtually impossible for them to persuade teachers to remain in the union, the Bundoora Secondary teacher said that he wouldn't be trying to stop anyone from leaving. He asked—why should anyone stay in the union? Why did we withdraw our labour [through the two mass meetings and rolling stoppages during the industrial campaign]? Why did we lose two or three days pay, why did we all go through this? Did we do it to get just 14 percent over three and a half years, instead of Brumby's offer of 13 percent? Did we do all of this for a paltry 1 percent?

He then referred to previous struggles ahead of the 2000 and 2004 agreements, which he noted had borne very little fruit. He explained how the union leadership had sabotaged the teachers' struggle by arguing that it was impossible to affect the government's legislation.

He gave the example of the widely despised VIT (Victorian Institute of Teaching)—a body set up by the Labor government to police and intimidate teachers. We were told by the union leaders, he said, that we had to accept the VIT—that there was nothing we could do, as the legislation was in place. So, if we are powerless to affect the government's legislation, why did we go on strike?

This union delegate, with obvious passion and anger, was expressing the real depth of opposition among teachers to this agreement. But even more than this, he was also reflecting a new critical attitude, and with it, a new political defiance which is beginning to emerge within the working class as a whole. For a whole period, the union leadership has threatened workers with existing legislation. A vivid example of this was provided by the AEU in the early 1990s, when the bureaucrats claimed it was impossible to fight the former state Liberal government of Jeff Kennett because its repressive legislation (TSO 140) made it illegal to speak out publicly.

In her final speech in favour of the agreement, Bluett referred to herself as an "honest woman". Teachers greeted this with howls of laughter.

Bluett maintained that the agreement was a "good package, worthy of support". The main problem, she declared, was the teachers who had not gone out on strike, who had not supported the campaign, and yet now stood to benefit from the deal. There was no mistaking the cynical message—aimed at inciting divisions among teachers. The obvious implication was that those opposed to the agreement should direct their ire at teachers outside the union, and not the AEU bureaucracy.

After Bluett's speech, the bureaucracy called for an indicative show of hands—a meaningless exercise as the votes had already been cast. I estimated that it was about 30 percent against and 50 percent in favour, with the rest appearing to abstain. At the very end, a young teacher from Eltham High (to whom I had spoken earlier) yelled out, enraged: "This is NOT democracy!" Henderson replied smugly: "Oh, why? Because you didn't win?"



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