

Australia: Victorian teachers' union convenes delegates' meetings to ram through industrial agreement

The Socialist Equality Party
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The Australian Education Union (AEU) is holding delegates' meetings across Victoria over the next two weeks to try and achieve ratification of its sell-out agreement with the state Labor government. These meetings have been convened on a completely antidemocratic and unrepresentative basis. Their essential function is to prevent ordinary teachers from being able to openly discuss and debate the contents of the proposed agreement, and to isolate those teachers who rightly sense that the union has betrayed their interests. By combining the arbitrary selection of union delegates with intimidatory tactics against teachers who oppose the deal, the AEU aims to push through a "yes" vote ahead of a state-wide secret ballot of all teachers, to be held later this month.

The Victorian public school teachers' campaign has lasted more than a year. It has involved a series of rolling work stoppages, as well as two mass meetings, with the central demands being a 30 percent pay rise over 3 years, maximum class sizes of 20, and a significant shift away from contract teaching to permanent positions. Yet the final agreement between the AEU and the Labor government of Premier John Brumby abandons all of these demands. For all but first-year and some senior teachers, the AEU has agreed to a real wage cut that almost exactly corresponds to the government's initial offer of a 3.25 percent nominal annual increase. The agreement contains nothing on class sizes, entrenches the ongoing exploitation of contract teachers, and further advances the government's right-wing education "Blueprint" agenda, including introducing new and unexplained categories of teachers such as "executive class" and "teachers assistants".

The Socialist Equality Party noted on May 20: "The fact that many teachers have never heard of these provisions simply underscores the need for mass meetings and a genuine discussion. But the AEU is proceeding in precisely the opposite manner, doing its utmost to spread confusion, conceal the real terms of the deal, and intimidate and bully members into accepting it... At every stage of the campaign, the union has fought to keep its membership isolated and in the dark and to stifle genuine discussion and debate. This situation can no longer be tolerated. Union branch meetings should be held at every school and resolutions passed rejecting the agreement and demanding that the union convene a mass meeting." (See "Demand mass meetings to

reject Victorian teachers' union sell-out!")

The AEU has organised the delegates' meetings to involve no more than 5 percent of the union membership, with one delegate per 20 members. In reality, the numbers involved will be significantly less, because in several schools not enough teachers have nominated themselves as delegates to fill the 20-1 ratio. The scheduled meetings—including only five for the entire Melbourne metropolitan area—are deliberately being held on school days in the afternoon in an attempt to lower attendance. In at least one school—Bacchus Marsh Secondary College—teachers have been told that they will not be permitted to attend the meetings as observers.

The delegates' meetings are not the appropriate forums for voting on the AEU deal, and teachers will be entitled to reject as illegitimate any outcome in which it is formally approved.

In at least one school, Niddrie Secondary College in Melbourne's western suburbs, the union branch secretary rejected calls from teachers to hold a branch meeting in order to elect delegates. Instead, a secret ballot on the agreement was held—without any discussion or distribution of material, including the text of the deal itself—and delegates were then to be simply appointed, unelected, by the pro-agreement union leadership.

A meeting was convened only after Frank Gaglioti, a member of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and teacher at the school, organised a petition to insist on a discussion. Even then the AEU leaders moved to quash debate by immediately announcing the result of the school's secret ballot—27 teachers (66 percent) for the agreement and 14 (34 percent) against. The atmosphere was designed to stifle discussion and intimidate younger teachers and those on contracts. In the end, only two teachers spoke. The rest of the meeting was devoted to the undemocratic process of binding the delegates' votes. Three were deputised by the union branch leadership, with two instructed to vote for and one against. No other teachers were invited to attend the delegates' meetings.

There is no doubt that what happened at Niddrie has been repeated in other schools across the state. The question needs to be posed to AEU Victorian President Mary Bluett and her colleagues: how many school branch secretaries have upheld their members' right to vote for their delegates? How many have simply appointed the union's trusted supporters?

In some other schools, where the union has successfully

browbeaten a majority into approving the agreement, the significant minorities that opposed it have been completely disenfranchised. Every delegate has been bound to vote “yes” at the ratification meetings. At Footscray City College, for example, while 45 percent of teachers at the union meeting voted against the agreement, the union succeeded in pushing through a resolution mandating every delegate to vote in favour. SEP member Will Marshall denounced the move as a means of leaving nearly half the branch without a voice.

There is no question that many teachers are bitterly hostile to the proposed agreement and are beginning to air their views. In response, the AEU has resorted to crude intimidation tactics. In a letter dated May 23, and mailed to every union member in Victoria, Bluett claimed that rejecting the deal would see teachers “lose one significant advantage in terms of the community who have supported our claim of ‘lowest funded schools: lowest paid teachers’.” The union president also referred to the initial media presentation of the agreement—which featured the AEU’s boast that Victorian teachers had won a historic victory and were now the highest paid in the country—as reason why the general public would not understand or support a “no” vote.

The letter’s contents are a desperate and cynical fraud. First of all, teachers have won overwhelming support throughout their dispute. Rejection of the AEU’s betrayal—combined with a sustained political and industrial campaign in defence of public education—would resonate widely among wide layers of the working class also facing declining living standards and working conditions. These include teachers in other states such as New South Wales, who have recently launched industrial action against the introduction of performance pay and other regressive measures, Qantas engineers fighting a real wage cut, and NSW electricity workers facing a state Labor government privatisation drive.

Secondly, the letter underscores the real reason for the public declarations of “victory” by Bluett and the Brumby government as soon as the deal was finalised: to ensure a “yes” vote and sideline opposition.

AEU officials have visited several schools in the past week, threatening that if the agreement is rejected teachers will be left with nothing. At one school, according to its principal Peter Lord, AEU Deputy President Ann Taylor declared that there was no point fighting for improved conditions—such as better staff-student ratios—because there were simply not enough staff available. Of course, she failed to explain the role of the union over the past two and a half decades in presiding over the destruction of thousands of jobs!

Many schools have rejected the proposed agreement, such as Braybrook Secondary College, Daylesford Secondary College, Moonee Ponds West Primary, Lilydale Secondary College and Dandenong High School, University High School, and Brunswick Secondary College. A number of schools have also passed no-confidence and censure motions against Bluett and the AEU executive. Teachers at Daylesford Secondary College unanimously approved a resolution censuring Bluett “for misrepresenting the proposed Schools Agreement 2008 as a major salary win for teachers when this is patently unjustified by any objective

analysis”. Another unanimous resolution “condemn[ed] the AEU leadership for issuing press releases/information which has resulted in a public impression that all teachers are getting a \$10,000 pay rise”.

The bureaucratically-run and undemocratic delegates’ meetings will not reflect the true depth of teachers’ anger and opposition to the AEU’s manoeuvres. Among those silenced will be thousands of contract teachers—now nearly 20 percent of the total workforce. Few contract teachers are likely to feel confident enough to speak against the agreement at the ratification meetings, given their school principals and other members of the panel who can review their employment are likely to be present. Young contract teachers who fear losing their jobs have been among the most determined opponents of the deal. Last year 75 percent of Victorian first-year teachers were on contracts, while 60 percent of third-year graduate teachers were still employed on this insecure basis.

The Socialist Equality Party has opposed the AEU-Brumby government agreement from the outset. We call on all teachers, whether delegates or not, to attend the ratification meetings to express their opposition to the proposed deal.

Members and supporters of the SEP also call on delegates—irrespective of whether they are for, against, or undecided on the proposed deal itself—to uphold the right of all teachers, including those on contracts, to become fully appraised of the agreement’s provisions through a full and open discussion and debate, and to defend the right of all teachers to vote on a document that is going to determine their wages and conditions, and the future of public education, over the next three years.

To this end, we call on delegates to move a motion at the outset of the delegates’ meetings to suspend standing orders and discuss the following resolution: “This ratification meeting affirms the rights of all AEU members to participate in a full and democratic discussion on the AEU agreement and the future of public education. We call for mass meetings to be held in metropolitan and regional areas in order to allow teachers to debate and cast a fully informed vote.”



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