

Australia: Victorian teachers' union opposes mass meetings to discuss industrial agreement

Our reporters
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The thoroughly antidemocratic character of the delegates' meetings convened by the Victorian Australian Education Union (AEU) to ratify its sell-out industrial agreement was clearly demonstrated yesterday. At the first such meeting, held in the AEU's headquarters in the inner-Melbourne suburb of Abbotsford, the bureaucracy ruled "out of order" an attempt by a supporter of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) to move a resolution calling for mass meetings to uphold the right of all teachers to cast an informed vote on the agreement after a full and democratic discussion.

Yesterday's meeting was the first of just five being held in the Melbourne metropolitan area, together with a number of others in rural and regional Victoria, over the next two weeks. All will no doubt proceed in a similarly undemocratic manner. Their essential purpose is to prevent teachers from debating the contents of the proposed AEU-state Labor government deal, and to isolate the substantial opposition that exists ahead of a state-wide secret ballot of all teachers scheduled for later this month.

The proposed deal abandons the central issues raised by teachers in the course of their year-long campaign—including a 30 percent pay rise over three years, maximum class sizes of 20, and a major shift away from contract teachers towards permanent positions—and instead will result in a wage cut for many. The agreement delivers nothing on teaching conditions and paves the way for the further undermining of public education through the state government's right-wing education "Blueprint".

Before yesterday's ratification meeting commenced, members and supporters of the SEP distributed a leaflet calling on delegates to support mass meetings.

"The AEU delegates' meetings that are being held to ratify the AEU-Brumby government industrial agreement have been organised on a thoroughly undemocratic basis," the leaflet explained. "They are not the forums that should be voting on this deal. While the AEU and the media have declared the deal a 'victory', a great deal of misinformation has been spread about its details, and most branches and members know very little about them.

"Members and supporters of the Socialist Equality Party call on all delegates—irrespective of whether you are for, against, or undecided on the proposed deal itself—to uphold the right of all teachers, including contract teachers, to become fully apprised 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."

Teachers' union deputy president Ann Taylor, who chaired the meeting, began by noting that a motion had been moved (by SEP supporter Sue Phillips) to suspend standing orders and debate a resolution which she read out to delegates: "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."

Taylor then declared that she was ruling the resolution "out of order" on the grounds that "this meeting has one purpose", namely to vote on the agreement. She said that resolutions calling for mass meetings to ratify the deal had been previously defeated at the AEU Council and at a mass meeting of teachers held last February. In response, Phillips raised her hand and dissented from the chair's ruling, forcing Taylor to ask for a seconder. Several teachers immediately volunteered.

Addressing the meeting, Phillips denounced Taylor's "out of order" ruling. "A lot of water has passed under the bridge since last February," she explained. "There has since been a deliberate campaign of misinformation organised by the union leadership, and teachers have not been informed as to what is in the proposed agreement. The most democratic way to proceed is to discuss it at a mass meeting where all points of view can be put. That's why this motion needs to be discussed here. The delegates' meetings have been held at a time when most of the membership cannot participate. In the metropolitan area there have only been five meetings called—this excludes whole numbers of teachers. And of course many of the young teachers and contract teachers have been excluded from the discussion because they fear losing their jobs. Delegates here—whether for or against the agreement itself—should support the convening of mass meetings."

In reply, Taylor attempted to turn reality on its head by posturing as a defender of democracy. She argued that a mass meeting to ratify the agreement had not been agreed to at the February mass meeting and that this must be respected. She failed to mention that the proposed agreement bears no relationship to the outcome teachers have been fighting for, or that the AEU was only able to defeat demands earlier in the year for a mass ratification meeting because many teachers still had lingering illusions that the union would defend their interests.

Phillips's dissent motion was put to the vote and defeated, with approximately 20 percent of the assembled delegates, however, voting in favour of discussing the mass meeting resolution.

The outcome reflected, no doubt, the ad hoc and arbitrary methods used to select delegates. In some schools, delegates were simply appointed by the union branch leadership, without any form of election or debate. In others, where union branch meetings were convened and a vote taken on the agreement, all delegates were mandated to vote for the agreement, effectively disenfranchising the substantial minorities against. As the Socialist Equality Party's statement of June 2 raised, "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?" (See "Victorian teachers' union convenes delegates' meetings to ram through industrial agreement")

After the union successfully suppressed the SEP's efforts to open up a discussion, the rest of the meeting took on something of a pro forma character—precisely what the bureaucracy had intended all along.

AEU Victorian Secretary Brian Henderson delivered a lengthy report on the agreement which rehashed all the bureaucracy's lies and distortions. Several teachers openly derided some of Henderson's assertions, such as his claim that there were no productivity trade-offs under the proposed deal. Henderson also declared that contract teachers would have a better chance of moving into permanent positions—leading one teacher to shake his head and murmur to a colleague, “He says it all with a straight face too...”.

Nine questions were taken after the report. SEP member Will Marshall challenged AEU Deputy President Ann Taylor's claim that her earlier ruling against the mass meeting resolution was based on a concern for democratic principles. He raised that at last February's mass meeting, teachers were told that they were fighting for substantially better wages and conditions, but the union was now publicly insisting that the dispute had only ever been about improving the pay scales of first-year and senior teachers. Marshall also noted that whole sections of the agreement, including the introduction of new categories of teachers such as “executive class” principals and “teachers' assistants”, had never been discussed at any teachers' meeting. After Taylor interrupted and demanded that a question be put, Marshall asked how the union justified blocking a mass meeting in these circumstances.

Henderson's brief reply did not address any of Marshall's central points. He claimed that industrial legislation made it difficult for the union to determine the government's categorisation of teachers, and added that teachers' assistants were already in use in Victoria. “When you negotiate you actually have to deal with an employer that has an agenda as well,” he declared. Marshall interjected: “It's the same agenda”.

AEU President Mary Bluett formally moved the resolution approving the agreement. She insisted that the proposed deal was “a very, very good package, one that members did campaign for”. Bluett insisted that if teachers rejected it, the Brumby government would invoke the former federal Howard government's WorkChoices industrial legislation to cancel the formal bargaining period and send the dispute to the arbitration courts, as it had done with the state's nurses. This, she concluded, would lead to an outcome far worse than the one currently on offer.

Bluett's argument underscores the AEU's real agenda throughout the industrial campaign—to prevent the development of any independent movement of teachers against the Labor Party. The threat that WorkChoices may be invoked demonstrates the necessity for ordinary teachers to take the struggle out of the hands of the union, and organise an industrial and political campaign against the Brumby government involving parents, school administrative staff, and broad layers of the working class.

During the formal debate, only three teachers were permitted to speak against the agreement. Paul Beekman, from University High School, told the meeting: “I have many concerns about this agreement. One of my main concerns is that we have achieved nothing about conditions in this agreement at all. I would have thought that as teachers we would all be concerned about our working conditions, I would have thought we would all be concerned about the effect that has upon our students. Nobody has spoken about students today. This agreement will harm students... Why is there nothing about conditions in this agreement? If you vote for this agreement you are saying you accept the conditions under which you work. And I leave you with this thought—look at what the federal government is doing with the public service and their workload. If we get a national agreement at some point in the future, you've already sold yourselves out.”

The vote was then held, with the show of hands appearing to demonstrate a ratio of about 3 or 4 to 1 voting for the agreement. The precise count is not known, however, as the AEU conducted the vote as a secret ballot. Delegates were not required to stay until the end of the meeting to vote and could simply drop their voting cards—some of which

carried more weight than others through proxy votes—into the relevant box to be tallied later. The show of hands was purely indicative.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with several teachers after the meeting.

Michael, a primary school teacher at Moonee Ponds West, voted against the AEU-Brumby agreement after earlier supporting Sue Phillips's efforts to move the mass meeting resolution. “I don't think the agreement reflects what people were seeking in the first place. The union is working hand-in-hand with the government and they just sold us out. I think wages are going to be just what they offered us in the first place—and the government's press release basically says they haven't given us anything extra. In terms of conditions, they don't deliver anything.

“From my perspective there is no benefit to vote for the agreement. At the school we voted unanimously against the agreement and I think that those teachers who have had others around them with time to look at the agreement, and have an intelligent discussion about it, realise that it is not a good agreement. I think the union put out a lot of propaganda, a lot of misleading tables. And even at the meeting Mary [Bluett] suggested that the world was going to end if we voted no and there was no way we were going to get a good outcome—it's almost like bullying people to pass it through.”

The WSWWS asked why he supported the SEP's call for mass meetings to be convened. “I think the structures of the unions are designed to quash dissent. At the end of the day the leadership wants this deal to go through. It's in their interests for it to go through and the government's interests for it to go through, so they are working hand-in-hand. The union has structures in place that make it hard for anyone with a different point, to get their point of view up and for it to be heard. You could see that today. They get shouted down if they try to speak, or you have to follow some complicated procedure.

“Sue [Phillips] had to shout dissent. That was the only way she got to speak. Originally, Ann Taylor had ignored her, and it was only when Sue stood up and walked to the microphone and shouted that she was recognised. Taylor heard her and deliberately ignored her. So what does that say about how the unions value their members' opinions? They claimed that this is a democratic way to proceed, but they don't value peoples' opinions, they don't want to hear another point of view—they want to push the agreement through. They know that a mass meeting would be a chance for everyone to go there and for everyone to have their say, for everyone to say what they think, and they don't want that.”

Reem Yunis, a teacher at Upwey High School—an outer suburban secondary college where the branch voted resoundingly against the agreement—was upset by the ratification meeting. “The way that Mary Bluett and Brian Henderson spoke—they fear that there is quite a bit of opposition. They were saying that if we reject the agreement now, then we are back to square one. The [Brumby] government is hiding behind the union. We should make our opposition clear to the media ourselves. We discussed at our branch last week that we should educate the parents against what was presented in the media, and explain to them why we are opposing the deal.”

Euan Morton and Kell Honeyman are from Collingwood College, where the agreement was approved by just two votes. “We're very disappointed with the way Mary Bluett was speaking,” Euan said. “She was saying that there can't be anything done about improving conditions because there is a teacher shortage. Surely we have to ask how this shortage has come about—who has caused it?” Kell added: “Anyway if there is a shortage, surely that should give us more bargaining power.”

Euan said: “We were very disappointed in the way contract teachers have been treated by this agreement. There is nothing in it at all for contract teachers. I've had four contracts at the school in three years—two for 6 months and two for 12 months. I wasn't put on ongoing employment until I threatened to leave. Lots of our staff are on contract under the

Brumby government.”

Kell, who is on her second contract at the school, outlined the atomisation of the teaching workforce she had experienced while teaching in Britain. “I was on staff along with two police sergeants. I was on £21,000 a year and the police sergeants were on £35,000. What do you think they were there to do? To keep the kids in line! I was working in Bristol—it was a working class area. Bristol Local Education Area is a disaster. They are making all the secondary schools have 1,500 students or more. At my school you had to stay up half the night to prepare classroom material to be projected. All the teachers were fighting to get the top O-level students. It would take a teacher about eight years to get to the stage where they were getting the top performing students. Then when the teachers got the best performance results, they could get out and get into the private system. That was what they were aiming to do. Britain is completely performance-based pay.”



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