

Australian Education Union convenes delegates' meeting to ram through sell-out agreement

Our reporters
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This week, the Australian Education Union (AEU) in Victoria commenced anti-democratically convened delegates' meetings, which are aimed at ramming through its sell-out deal with the state Liberal government on a new public school teachers' enterprise bargaining agreement.

Last month, the union shut down the teachers' protracted industrial campaign, which had involved three one-day strikes and mass meetings, and announced it had made a "historic achievement" with the new agreement. Its claims, however, that teachers had won a 16-20 percent wage rise and other gains were quickly exposed as outright fabrications. The deal involves annual salary rises of 2.75 to 3 percent—a real wage cut. It contains a series of clauses eroding workplace protections for teachers, including the elimination of priority placement for teachers deemed "excess" to a school's requirements, and a new procedure to fast track the sacking of teachers alleged to be "poor performers." The state government has also declared its determination to enforce measures, previously endorsed by the AEU, that tie annual salary increment gains to "performance" benchmarks, in other words, performance pay.

The agreement is entirely in line with the AEU's role as enforcer of the bipartisan assault on public education that is being spearheaded by the federal Labor government, in collaboration with its state government allies.

Among ordinary teachers there is widespread anger and opposition to the contents of the deal and to the anti-democratic measures the AEU has employed to push it through.

In an attempt to suppress discussion, the union withheld the details of the agreement from its members for nine days after publicly announcing it had been finalised. Then it pressured teachers to nominate delegates to approve the

deal, before they even had an opportunity to read what it contained.

The entire delegates' meetings process is a well-worn method that has been utilised by the union bureaucracy for years to dissipate opposition and engineer a rubber-stamp approval for their sell-out deals. As in 2008, this year's meetings have been convened in an arbitrary and ad hoc manner. In many instances, branch meetings of union members have not been held to discuss the agreement. Instead, incumbent branch leaders have selected themselves as the appointed delegates and voted however they pleased. In other cases, branches with a slight majority in favour of the deal have bound the votes of all their delegates, disenfranchising the substantial minorities who wanted a "no" vote.

Moreover, delegates' votes can only be cast with their name and school marked on their ballot, allowing the AEU to closely monitor all opposition.

At the first meeting, held at the union's headquarters in Melbourne on Monday evening, many delegates cast their vote in favour of the union's agreement and left before the discussion even began. Of the approximately 100 delegates who participated in the meeting, there was significant opposition. At the start, Socialist Equality Party (SEP) member and teachers' delegate Frank Gaglioti interrupted standing orders and moved a procedural motion to limit the AEU's opening report to 15 minutes, in order to allow full time for discussion and for oppositional voices to be raised. In previous delegates' meetings, the union has used the opening report and other mechanisms to dominate the entire meeting, limiting discussion to the shortest possible time at the end.

An AEU supporter opposed Gaglioti's resolution, falsely claiming that it would "gag" the AEU state

president, Meredith Peace. However, a majority of delegates voted in favour, underscoring the extent of anger towards the union leadership and its suppression of discussion in previous mass meetings and other forums.

In her allocated time, Peace claimed that there had been a successful campaign mounted over three years. Blatantly repeating the union's lies, she hailed the agreement as a complete success, insisting that she and her colleagues had beaten back many of the state government's demands during negotiations, including for performance pay. In the subsequent question and answer session, several teachers challenged her claims over wages, protections for "excess" teachers, and the incremental performance reviews.

When the debate began on whether to endorse the agreement, SEP member Will Marshall warned: "Public education is under assault internationally, in the US, Britain, Europe and just recently in Denmark, where 90,000 teachers were locked out for over one month, to impose a new series of attacks. Government after government is implementing austerity policies. They now regard public education as an intolerable expense to be targeted for destruction along with healthcare, welfare and other social services."

He continued: "It is time teachers began to draw some lessons and act on this experience. Confined within the political and organisational straitjacket of the union, no genuine campaign in defence of wages and conditions is possible." Marshall also denounced the role being played by the Teachers and Education Support Staff Alliance (TESA), a faction within the union led by the pseudo-left Socialist Alternative and Socialist Alliance.

Socialist Alternative and TESA member Tess Lee Ack had written an article on April 30 designed to assist the union leadership's presentation of the proposed agreement as a fait accompli. A "no" vote, she wrote would be "unprecedented" and "is not likely to happen this time." This demoralised conclusion was advanced to bolster the pseudo-lefts' determined efforts to block teachers from making a conscious break with the AEU. "If a significant minority votes No, it will send a signal to the officials that they need to lift their game," she concluded. Lee Ack added that teachers should not leave the union, as many have threatened to do since the AEU's sell-out deal was announced.

Speaking at Monday's delegates' meeting, Lee Ack attempted to maintain TESA's bogus credentials as opponents of the AEU's deal. She dealt exclusively with its technical content, underscoring the pseudo-lefts'

primary preoccupation—blocking teachers from understanding that they are locked in a political struggle with both the state Liberal and federal Labor governments. The AEU's Meredith Peace then told the meeting that TESA had opposed the deal that had been struck with government, a revealing exchange that pointed to the pseudo-lefts' role as a critical safety valve for channelling opposition back behind the union.

At the end of the debate, the union called for an "indicative" vote by show of hands, and began counting the numbers. When it became clear, however, that a significant majority of remaining delegates were opposed to the agreement, the AEU promptly shut down the meeting and refused to reveal the vote count. The episode underscored yet again the bureaucracy's hostility to democratic procedure and its acute sensitivity towards any opposition among ordinary teachers to its operations.

Teachers must continue to fight for the widest possible discussion in their schools on the contents and significance of the proposed agreement, explaining its implications for public education as a whole and that it must be rejected. New rank and file committees, independent of and in opposition to the AEU, must be formed to coordinate a political counter-offensive that unites teachers, parents and students, as well as other sections of the working class facing similar attacks—including university staff, TAFE teachers, and other public sector workers—against the federal Labor and state Liberal governments on the basis of a socialist program.

The authors also recommend:

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