

Australian Education Union pushes sell out through delegates' meetings

Our reporters
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The Australian Education Union (AEU) in Victoria yesterday announced that delegates' meetings had voted by a 78-percent margin to ratify its sell out industrial agreement with the state Liberal government. The substantial 22 percent "no" vote gave some indication of the growing hostility among teachers to the union's betrayals.

AEU officials secured the majority vote, despite determined opposition among a broad layer of teachers, through its time-tested tactics of keeping teachers in the dark about the agreement's contents, suppressing discussion, fuelling scepticism and resignation, and utilising anti-democratically convened delegates' meetings to isolate the opposition. The experience underscores the warning raised from the outset by the Socialist Equality Party—that within the political straitjacket of the AEU, teachers cannot defend their independent interests and fight the offensive against public education.

Teachers had waged a year-long industrial campaign that included three one-day strikes and mass meetings, as well as rolling stoppages and work bans. The AEU initially called for a 30 percent wage rise over three years, reduced class sizes, the reduced employment of teachers on insecure contracts, and improvements in conditions.

The final agreement with the government involved annual wage rises of just 2.75 to 3 percent, no improvements on class sizes or contract teaching, and regressive new measures. These included the elimination of employment protections for teachers deemed "excess" to schools' requirements and a fast track mechanism for sacking "poor performers".

Premier Denis Napthine's state government made clear that the deal paves the way for enforcing a performance pay mechanism agreed to by the AEU in a previous industrial agreement, with near-automatic incremental salary rises now tied to certain classroom benchmarks.

The union bureaucracy hailed the agreement as a "historic achievement" and lied about various aspects of the deal. By incorporating incremental wage gains that most teachers would receive anyway, the AEU claimed to have won a 16-20 percent wage rise.

After this bogus figure was trumpeted in the media, the union withheld the text of the agreement from teachers for more than a week. Schools were encouraged to nominate delegates to approve the deal without teachers having an opportunity to examine the agreement. The delegates' meetings were convened in an arbitrary manner. In many instances, branch meetings of union members were not held to discuss the agreement and vote for delegates, with incumbent branch leaders nominating themselves to vote in favour. In other cases, branches with a slight majority in favour of the deal bound the votes of all their delegates, disenfranchising the substantial minorities who wanted a "no" vote.

Wherever there was a wide discussion among teachers, substantial majorities voted against the agreement. This was most evident in the schools and AEU branches where members and supporters of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) were able to expose the bureaucracy and its regressive agreement.

In two delegates' meetings, a procedural motion by SEP supporters to limit the union secretary's opening report to 15 minutes and allow adequate time for opponents of the deal to speak received a majority vote, despite the bureaucracy's opposition. In other meetings, where this motion was narrowly defeated, AEU secretary Meredith Peace took up about 45 minutes of the meeting, repeating the union's falsifications.

At all the meetings, many union leadership supporters dropped their ballots in the "yes" box and then left without bothering to participate in the discussion. The union reported majority "yes" votes at every meeting. Such was the nervousness of the bureaucracy, however,

that it attempted to suppress an indicative vote by show of hands at the end of at least two meetings, where a majority opposed the agreement.

At the May 6 meeting in the inner Melbourne suburb of Abbotsford, union representatives began to count the vote, only to abruptly shut down the meeting when they realised they had lost the count. At a May 13 meeting in Eltham, Peace claimed the right to cast a delegates' vote in favour of the agreement, in order to produce a deadlocked vote. The meeting chairperson, Marino D'Ortenzio, another senior union functionary, then declared that he would cast a deciding "yes" vote. The meeting was shut down amid uproar.

"The union's objective is to get the deal through no matter what," a primary school teacher with 12 years' experience told the *World Socialist Web Site* during the delegates' meeting. "They are strategising that the best way for them is through delegates' meetings—it seems to me they are trying to manage a wildfire, keep people divided so they can conquer. This is how they run the meetings anyway, stifle discussion and stop people from speaking... The anger and opposition of teachers to the deal is different this time compared to [the last agreement in] 2008. It is like being hustled by the same person twice. The first time it happens you think— 'wow' what happened then? Like going to a restaurant and getting ripped off, you pay the bill and you are out on the street before you realise what happened. The second time around, you are far more careful, you watch out."

A teacher from Middle Kinglake Primary School said: "I see the union less and less as representing us... The union leaders' pay is at principal levels—\$130,000 a year, plus a phone and car. They get an extraordinary amount of money and it's our money. I find it offensive. It should be publicised what they get paid. If you wanted to get teachers angry with the union, just put out their pay scale. They are very good at looking after themselves but they are not as good at looking after the membership."

The AEU bureaucrats, like their counterparts in other trade unions, comprise a privileged upper middle class stratum. Its material interests depend on implementing the bipartisan assault on public education, spearheaded by Julia Gillard's Labor government, against public school teachers.

Teachers in Australia and around the world, especially in the US and Europe, are under attack as the ruling elite attempts to eliminate the right to public education. Resources are funnelled into private schools, while every aspect of education is subordinated to the demands of

business for more productive workforces. Standardised testing regimes, such as Labor's NAPLAN scheme, are designed to narrow the curriculum and discipline teachers while also providing the key mechanism for shutting down so-called underperforming schools and imposing mass layoffs of teachers.

This offensive is part of a broader social counter-revolution, in which the financial aristocracy is seeking a way out of the global economic crisis by eliminating spending on welfare, public health and education, social infrastructure and other basic services. The aim is to slash working class living standards to boost corporate profits and economic "competitiveness."

The AEU sell out still has to be ratified in a general ballot of all teachers, under the government's Fair Work Act, before it takes effect. Teachers must vote "no," as the first step in a counter-offensive in defence of their interests and public education.

A successful struggle is only possible by developing new forms of organisation—rank and file committees in every school that unite teachers, students and local communities—independently of, and in opposition to, the AEU. These committees should turn out to other layers of the working class confronting similar attacks, including teachers throughout Australia, university and TAFE staff, and other public sector workers.

Above all, what is required is a socialist and internationalist perspective. Education is a fundamental social right. Every young person ought to have access to a properly-resourced, freely available, and high quality public school system that allows them to fully develop their talents, intellects and capacities. This, however, is not realisable within the framework of the crisis-stricken capitalist system. It requires the development of a revolutionary movement of the working class. This is the SEP's perspective and we urge teachers and education workers to contact us to develop a discussion on these crucial issues.



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