

How the AEU is attempting to push through a sell-out of Victorian teachers

Susan Allan
17 April 2017

The Victorian branch of the Australian Education Union (AEU) is attempting to pressure teachers into voting “Yes” for its latest Enterprise Bargaining Agreement (EBA) with the state Labor government. It is using a series of anti-democratic and bureaucratic measures to silence considerable, but, at this point, unorganised opposition among teachers and education support (ES) staff.

After 12 months of closed-door discussions with the Victorian Labor government, the AEU has signed off on an in-principle agreement on teachers’ salaries and working conditions. The deal was finalised without even the pretext of consultation with union members and announced just days before the term break.

AEU president Meredith Peace has declared that its agreement with the Labor government is a “victory.” She has asserted that it addresses the “crushing workload” on teachers and provides “secure employment” for teachers and ES staff. A critique of the EBA undertaken by teachers who belong to the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), and which was published by the *World Socialist Web Site*, demonstrates that it does neither. Moreover, the agreement imposes a real wage cut and sanctions stepped-up surveillance of teacher “performance” based on their students’ results in standardised testing (see: “Australian teachers’ agreement: The reality behind union ‘victory’ claims”).

The proposed EBA is entirely in line with the AEU’s role as the enforcer of the national performance-ranking based assault that is underway on public education across the country—an assault paralleled and even further advanced in countries such as the United Kingdom and the United States. The federal government, whether headed by Labor or the Coalition, and with the collaboration with the state governments, is seeking to slash public education costs and accelerate the growth of private, fee-paying schools.

Teachers and education support staff need to ask the following questions:

- If the agreement is such a “significant gain” then why is there no framework or democratic process where teachers can discuss, debate, and seek clarification on its contents?

- Why was the EBA endorsed by the AEU just days before teachers were set to vote for protected industrial action, and on the eve of the term holiday break?

- Why have no mass meetings been called, where those “for” or “against” the agreement can have their views heard?

- Why are teachers not being provided with sufficient time to read and discuss the agreement in their local school union branches before they elect their delegates to attend meetings where a vote on the EBA will be taken?

- Why are the comments of teachers who are presenting opposition to the agreement on the AEU Facebook page, which is virtually the only “official” means available, being blocked and deleted?

When teachers return to school this week, they will have just nine working days to call a meeting of their local branch and elect representatives for delegate meetings that begin on May 1. Branch meetings will have to be held before or after school, under conditions where teachers are working on average 53 hours per week and are mandated to attend at least two to three hours of other after-school meetings. Many ES staff who work part-time will be unable to attend, restricting their right to express their opinions.

This process follows a well-worn path of anti-democratic and bureaucratic measures by the union leadership over many decades.

The delegates’ meetings consist of nine meetings in the metropolitan centre of Melbourne and 21 in country and regional centres. Local branches can elect one delegate per 20 union members, or part thereof. The delegate meetings therefore objectively water down the view of union members at schools where efforts have been made to fully discuss the agreement and where there is strong opposition.

In the 2008 and 2012-13 EBA negotiations, some local branches did not even call meetings to elect their delegates. Local incumbent representatives of the union simply appointed themselves.

In the past, delegates meetings have been bureaucratically-managed, allowing maximum time for the union leadership

to speak in support of the agreement, and minimal time afforded to opposition. This process was opposed in 2013 by members of the SEP, who suspended standing orders and restricted the time of the union officials to dominate meetings.

Delegates voted via a secret ballot but had to identify their name and school on the ballot paper. This requirement is intended to intimidate teachers.

After two weeks of delegates meetings, the union will announce the result of the vote—which is counted by the union leadership, not an independent body. This is followed by a government-imposed secret ballot of all employees of the Department of Education, which includes both union and non-union members.

In December, last year the same anti-democratic tactics were utilised by the NSW Teachers Federation (NSWTF)—an affiliate of the AEU in the state of New South Wales—when it rammed through a new salaries and conditions agreement in a one-hour meeting. With teachers having no opportunity to read the agreement, the union handed them its own five-point “summary,” and expected them to vote on it in hundreds of separate meetings spread across the state.

Like their counterparts in Victoria, the bureaucrats in NSW claimed the deal contained no erosion of conditions. In fact, the NSWTF had already signed off on the reintroduction of inspectors and agreed to the introduction of a new *Bump It Up* program, aimed at intensified NAPLAN testing of Year 9 students (see: “New South Wales government ‘bumps up’ standardised testing in schools”).

There is a clear relationship between the anti-democratic measures of the AEU apparatus and the regressive content of the agreement.

The AEU has served as the crucial mechanism enabling the imposition of a retrogressive educational agenda that was introduced under the Rudd/Gillard Labor government and which is still falsely presented as “educational reform.” The “reforms” include NAPLAN (National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy) standardised testing, *My School* public ranking web site, school “autonomy”, teacher performance reviews tied to school improvement and NAPLAN-derived student data (see: “Australian government seizes on NAPLAN test scores to justify budget cuts”). All opposition by teachers has been bureaucratically suppressed.

The objective of education “reform,” as it is in the UK, New Zealand and the US, is to entrench a two-class system that consists of low-cost, poorly-resourced public schools alongside elite “selective” schools and an ever-expanding fee-paying private sector.

The beneficiaries are the corporations and the wealthy, which reap the tax reductions financed by cutbacks to public education spending. Working class youth are being

condemned to a second-class education and a future of low-paid, insecure, casual work.

Teachers need to draw sharp lessons and lead the fight for social equality. It is critical that graduates, younger teachers, and ES staff review the historical record of the AEU and previous struggles. The AEU’s endorsement of this agreement is not an aberration. It is part of the modus operandi of the AEU and all unions, in alliance with government, to insist that workers bow down to the interests of corporate profit.

This situation poses the need for the development of independent initiative by teachers outside the framework of the AEU.

At every school, teachers should elect a rank-and-file committee that is committed to the defence of teaching conditions and public education.

Teachers and ES staff should circulate oppositional critiques of the agreement and convene local meetings, at a time when as many staff can attend, to discuss its content and elect delegates.

Resolutions should be moved that the delegates’ meetings demand that a vote on the EBA should not be held until after mass meetings that are open to all teachers, both union and non-union members, and where equal time is provided for both supporters and opponents to present their case.

There must be a rebellion against the AEU and a clear “No” vote to this reactionary agreement. A “No” vote, however, can clearly only be the beginning of a political struggle to reverse the assault on public education and all other social gains of the working class.

The aim must be the establishment of a workers’ government that will place the banks and major corporations into public ownership and ensure that society’s resources are used to meet social needs, including free high-quality education for all and decent pay and conditions for staff, not to accumulate profit and wealth for a minority.



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