

Australia: Growing opposition to sell-out agreement among Victorian teachers and support staff

Our reporters
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Opposition is growing among teachers and education support workers to the sell-out deal agreed by the Australian Education Union (AEU) and the Andrews Labor government in the state of Victoria, and to the union's efforts to suppress all dissent.

Last week, teachers from at least five schools across the state—including Footscray City College, Moonee Ponds West primary school and Rosehill Secondary College—have convened union branch meetings to pass resolutions rejecting the agreement. The *World Socialist Web Site* also understands that teachers at Kororoit Creek primary school in Caroline Springs have voted to oppose the deal. At Footscray City College and Moonee Ponds West, resolutions were also passed demanding that mass meetings be held to allow teachers to democratically debate the content of the deal. The unanimously-adopted resolutions at Moonee Ponds West declare:

1. That this meeting of Moonee Ponds West primary school AEU sub-branch rejects the AEU in-principle agreement and calls on our elected delegates to vote 'no' at the AEU ratification meeting.

2. Further, before any ballot of the membership, the AEU calls mass meetings to discuss the in-principle agreement, giving equal speaking time to those 'for' and those 'against.'

3. The practice of deleting dissenting comments from the AEU Facebook page must cease immediately, in order to allow an open and democratic discussion to take place about the in-principle agreement.

Beginning this Monday, AEU delegates meetings will be convened to vote on the agreement. The delegates meetings are themselves a cynical manoeuvre by the union to steamroll opposition to the sell-out. For the first time in 30 years, no mass meetings of the membership have been called on the enterprise bargaining agreement.

Even if the delegates voted "no," ballot papers for a ratification vote on the unchanged agreement would still be mailed to all members—in other words, the vote of the delegates is meaningless. Its only purpose is to create the conditions where a "yes" vote can be used by the union bureaucrats to place pressure on teachers and ES staff opposed to the deal, who are being forced to vote on a person-by-person basis, isolated from their colleagues.

The union has also sought to suppress discussion on social media, systematically deleting critical posts on the union's own Facebook page. One post linking to a *World Socialist Web Site* article that analysed the agreement and answered the union's fraudulent claim that it represents a "significant win" for teachers was deleted within minutes of being published.

A Facebook page—"Teachers and ES staff against the Victorian education agreement"—established by teachers who are members of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) has provided a forum for teachers to discuss and debate both the agreement itself, as well as the broader political issues posed by the struggle against the decades-long assault on public education. A Facebook video statement by Will Marshall, a teacher of more than 30 years' standing and a member of the Socialist Equality Party, has been viewed several thousand times and "shared" almost 100 times.

The union's manoeuvres reflect the contents of the agreement itself. On every issue, it further deepens the ongoing attacks on public education. Insecure, contract teaching will continue to grow, conditions for highly exploited and underpaid ES staff will worsen, and nothing will be done to address the enormous levels of unpaid additional labour—an average of 15 hours per week—performed by teachers, who are forced to bridge the gap between the educational, emotional and social needs

of students and the systematic starvation of resources from the public education system for decades, by both Liberal and Labor state and federal governments, with the assistance of the trade unions.

The agreement commits the union to extending this assault through sweeping pledges to enforce a performance system tied to education department criteria, school priorities and student data. This is a euphemism for the NAPLAN standardised testing regime, which was established by the former federal Labor government in 2009–2010, and modelled on similar schemes in the United States and the United Kingdom.

Standardised testing is being utilised, not only to limit the curriculum in line with the narrow requirements of employers for numeracy and literacy, to the detriment of the all-rounded cultural and educational development of each child. It is fundamentally aimed at scapegoating teachers and “underperforming schools” for the public education crisis, which will be used to shutter schools, slash funding, and move to an entirely for-profit private and charter school system. The conditions in public schools are already resulting in an exodus of young teachers.

The union has cynically insisted that the deal is the “best” that could be achieved. This is clearly absurd, given that it sought from the outset to prevent any industrial action by teachers. In fact, the AEU’s support for such a rotten outcome, and its virulent opposition to the most basic democratic rights of its membership, express the union’s conscious hostility to the elementary interests of teachers, students and ES staff alike.

In every country, the unions no longer function, in any sense of the term, as organisations representing the working class. Under conditions of the global integration of production, they have presided over a 30-year wrecking operation against working-class living standards, public education and other public services, creating unprecedented levels of social inequality.

The Socialist Equality Party is calling for a “no” vote to the union-negotiated EBA. Such a vote means openly defying both the AEU and the state Labor government, which is why teachers and ES staff are being put under such immense pressure to accept it.

But if teachers vote for this sell-out, that will mean passively acquiescing to another four years of cutbacks, contemptuous conditions for both staff and students in the schools and the continual undermining of what a genuine education for young people should be.

What, then, does a “no” vote mean? What would follow

it?

As far as the union is concerned, it would respond by simply re-entering negotiations with the government, do everything it could to intimidate and dissipate opposition, and then try to ram through another version of the same deal with the Andrews Labor government.

The critical issue, however, is what should teachers and ES staff do?

First and foremost, teachers must begin to establish new rank and file organisations that are completely independent of the AEU. These must be genuinely representative organisations—workplace and school committees—that will seek to develop unified struggles with their counterparts in other schools, and turn out to parents, students, and other sections of the working class as part of the struggle against the ongoing privatisation of public education, its transformation into an arid testing regime and the ever-escalating assault on teachers’ jobs, conditions and wages.

This requires nothing less than a new, socialist, perspective, which recognises that access to an enlightened, fully funded and resourced public education is a *social right* for all young people, based not on what capitalist governments and their corporate and financial backers decide they can afford, but on what the working class and the youth need.

In other words, a well-resourced, free public education system, together with all the basic social rights of the working class—to public health and transport, a decent, well-funded retirement, clean environment, etc—is incompatible with the capitalist social and economic order, which subordinates every aspect of life to the profit interests of a tiny corporate oligarchy. Capitalism offers only a future of catastrophic war, poverty and an ever-accelerating drive towards authoritarian rule—not only in the US and Europe, but throughout the world. The alternative is the fight for a workers’ government that will reorganise economic life under the democratic control of the working class, in order to serve social needs, not private profit. That is the socialist and internationalist perspective of the Socialist Equality Party, and we urge all teachers and ES staff to read the *World Socialist Web Site* and seriously consider joining the SEP.



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