

Vote “NO” to the EBA!

Australian Education Union pushes through industrial agreement at delegates’ meetings

Our reporters
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The Australian Education Union (AEU) announced on Friday that delegates’ meetings in Victoria had approved its sell-out industrial agreement with the state Labor government. More than 55,000 public school teachers, education support (ES) staff and other Department of Education and Training workers covered by the agreement, must now vote on it in a secret ballot.

The union reported that 1,554 delegates had voted for the deal, and 334 against, or 82 to 18 percent. Delegate votes were allocated to schools on the basis of one per 20 unionised teachers and ES staff.

The outcome of the delegates’ meetings is the first product of a calculated, anti-democratic operation carried out by the AEU bureaucracy, which has been determined, from the outset, to prevent teachers from having any opportunity to discuss and consider the terms of the deal before voting on it. The delegates’ vote will now be used to try and pressure the bulk of teachers and ES staff to accept it as well.

The AEU is advocating a “Yes” vote in the secret ballot. Socialist Equality Party (SEP) members and supporters, who work in public education and oppose the government-union agreement, will step up their campaign among rank-and-file teachers and ES staff for a “No” vote.

The AEU deal with the government is the first time that a four-year industrial agreement has been made without any strike action by public teachers and ES staff, and without a single mass meeting. In 2013, there were three state-wide strikes and mass meetings, involving tens of thousands of school staff. This time, the union feared it could rapidly lose control of such actions, due to the already palpable hostility among many staff to government attacks on public education.

In March, the AEU announced that it was shutting down planned industrial action before it even began, insisting that the agreement represented a “significant gain.”

After announcing the deal through the media, just days before a two-week term holiday, overworked teachers and ES staff had only two weeks before the AEU ratification meetings began, to convene meetings at their schools to discuss it and elect delegates.

During this period, the union deleted any posts that were critical of the deal from its Facebook page, including articles published on the *World Socialist Web Site*. At numerous schools, only a small minority of teachers took part in the selection of delegates. The

delegates’ meeting themselves had a far smaller attendance than comparable meetings in 2013.

Underlying the 18 percent “no” vote by union delegates, however, and the abstention from voting, is growing anger among broader sections of teachers over the accelerating assault on public education and the intolerable working conditions in chronically underfunded and understaffed schools.

Wherever teachers and ES staff have had an opportunity to examine and consider the real content of the agreement, sharp opposition has emerged.

If the AEU deal is ratified, conditions for teachers, and the quality of public education for hundreds of thousands of youth, will rapidly worsen:

- * Excessive workloads will continue, with teachers working an average of 15 hours’ unpaid overtime each week;

- * The union’s touted wage increase is less than the annual rise in the cost of living;

- * Contract employment will remain rife in schools;

- * All the previous union betrayals, including allowing the sacking of teachers deemed “excess” to school requirements, or “underperforming”, have been entrenched;

- * The union is facilitating the government’s drive to tie school funding to teacher “performance,” assessed on the basis of student standardised test outcomes (see “What the Australian Education Union is suppressing”);

- * The NAPLAN standardised testing regime, which is utterly inimical to the intellectual, cultural, physical and psychological development of young people, will continue.

A definite shift among school staff has been evident since the previous sell-out deal imposed in 2013. A number of younger teachers are coming forward to oppose both the agreement and the AEU leadership, with the most advanced layers closely following the SEP’s campaign, including through its teachers’ and ES staff Facebook page.

This was demonstrated at both the local branch and delegates’ meetings where SEP members and supporters spoke against the union deal. AEU vote tallies at those delegates’ meetings—Abbotsford, Deer Park, Eltham, Westmeadows, and Melton—showed a significantly higher percentage of “no” votes than the overall state figure.

At the first meeting on May 1 in Abbotsford, SEP member and

secondary teacher Will Marshall moved for the calling of a state-wide stoppage and mass meetings. The AEU ruled this out of order, but his demand for a proper discussion opened up the meeting and encouraged other teachers to speak in opposition (see “Teachers oppose Australian Education Union sell-out deal at Victorian delegates meeting”).

At several meetings, SEP members moved a procedural motion limiting the AEU’s main report to 15 minutes and allowing at least an hour of open discussion, so that those both “for” and “against” could speak. They noted that in previous delegates’ meetings, AEU bureaucrats had provided pro-deal spin for nearly an hour, before anyone else could ask a question or speak.

SEP members also condemned anti-democratic union rules that allow no more than two delegates to speak “against” before the union asks two speakers “for” to address the meeting. If no-one wishes to speak “for,” the meetings are immediately shut down. At several ratification meetings, AEU bureaucrats discouraged teachers and ES staff from staying for the discussion, actively encouraging them to register, vote, and leave immediately.

When SEP member and primary school teacher Sue Phillips explained these issues at the May 10 Westmeadows meeting, in Melbourne’s working class north, two teachers rose to express their support for a full discussion. They also used the opportunity to express their hostility to the proposed agreement, and opposition to the AEU’s claims that it included gains on workload.

After the AEU’s state president Meredith Peace promoted the agreement for her allocated 15 minutes, a lively question-and-answer period ensued. Several teachers and ES staff, from different primary and secondary public schools in the area, raised their opposition to various aspects of the AEU deal.

Numbers of longstanding teachers, with knowledge of previous agreements and conditions in schools, expressed fears that higher-paid, older teachers were being targeted, named in “excess,” and then forced to compete for their jobs against graduates.

A teacher from John Fawcner College raised concerns about “peer observation” and its connection with inspectors. An SEP member demanded to know why the union had submitted a log-of-claims that allowed teachers to opt out of “peer observation” if requested, but had then agreed to mandatory “peer observation” by a new category of school staff, labelled “learning specialists.” Peace asserted that this had been a “big ticket item” and “something that the government really wanted.”

A teacher from Northcote College asked who had proposed the four new “professional practice” days a year—the government, or the union—since far from providing relief, teachers’ classes still have to be covered while they do assessment and planning work. The union has falsely promoted these four days as a gain for reducing workloads. When asked who had proposed the measure, the government or the union, Peace hesitated, pretended she could not remember, then admitted, “probably them.”

In other delegates meetings, SEP members cited government figures showing that the new “professional practice” days would cost just \$300 million over four years, compared to \$800 million if teachers had an additional one hour per week for planning. They also emphasised that the AEU had provided the government with a blanket commitment to support its “education reform”

agenda—which is part of a wider assault on public education in Australia and internationally.

The extent of opposition that has already been revealed demonstrates that the task now is to ensure that as many teachers and ES staff across Victoria are made familiar with the content and implications of the agreement before they vote. The union bureaucracy’s calculated efforts to try and ram the deal through underscores that teachers and ES staff will need to take matters into their own hands.

Teachers and ES staff should demand that a meeting take place at their school, *at least a number of days prior to the secret ballot*, and involving *all* staff, union and non-union. Time must be afforded for both a democratic debate, in which the case for and against the deal can be made, and for staff to carefully consider how they will vote. SEP members with intimate knowledge of the details of the agreement will, if invited, be available to attend school meetings to make the case for a “No” vote.

More critically, the experience of the past weeks shows the need for new organisations that are independent of the AEU. Democratic, rank-and-file committees must be established within the schools, uniting teachers, ES staff, students and parents against the substandard state of facilities and resources at many public schools, the contemptuous working hours, pay and conditions being imposed on teachers, and against NAPLAN testing and performance ranking.

For such committees to be genuinely democratic, and politically and organisationally independent of the teacher unions, they must be based on a socialist perspective, aimed against the capitalist profit system itself.

To contact the SEP and become active in the fight for genuine high quality, free public education at all levels, and for the broader social rights of the working class, [click here](#). To invite SEP representatives to speak at a meeting at your school, email sep@sep.org.au.

The authors also recommend:

The political issues in the fight to reject the Victorian teachers’ EBA

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Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact