

Australia:

Teachers criticise anti-democratic character of AEU delegates' meetings

Our reporters
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Socialist Equality Party (SEP) members and supporters, all teachers, attended recent delegates' meetings, called by the Australian Education Union (AEU), to vote on a new four-year agreement that the union had signed with the Victorian Labor government. The deal, like those of the past three-and-a-half decades, represents an escalating attack on the jobs, wages and working conditions of Victorian public school teachers and ES staff.

At the meetings, AEU officials sought to limit discussion, or suppress it altogether, in an attempt to push through a "Yes" vote. At some meetings, SEP members were able to move resolutions upholding the democratic right of teachers to speak. At others, the AEU blocked them. At several meetings, however, SEP teachers spoke against the deal, exposing in detail why teachers needed to vote "No."

Following the meetings, the SEP conducted interviews with teachers who attended. They will be published over the coming days on the WSWS.

Lucy, a secondary school teacher, participated in the meeting in Meadow Heights, in Melbourne's northern suburbs. She said she had spoken in favour of the procedural resolution moved by SEP speakers calling for democratic debate and discussion.

"I couldn't understand why the union was asking us to put our vote in the ballot box first and have discussion second," she said. "It made no sense to me. I also wanted to say my bit against the agreement before being asked to sit down."

Referring to the enormous pressure under which teachers are forced to work, including, on average, at least 15 extra unpaid hours each week, she declared, "I told my principal today that I will be retiring next

year... all the extra useless crap is driving good experienced teachers out!"

Lucy raised that her branch had voted "no" to the agreement, and pointed out, "That was because of my efforts to explain what was in it. I typed up a one page response to the agreement/sell-out deal and gave a copy to all AEU members at work, including some non-union teachers. I spoke at a staff meeting and encouraged people to vote no. No-one had read the agreement and probably would have voted yes. Everyone thought the AEU knows best. All of this is a sign of overworked and exhausted staff."

Amanda, a primary school teacher of 17 years standing, who also attended the Meadow Heights meeting, condemned the fact that the deal had been announced just before the holidays. This meant, she said, "that the staffroom conversation did not even happen, because there was so much going on at the end of term and then, after the holidays, we had only a couple of weeks before we were meant to vote, which again stifled discussion."

Amanda said that she had earlier attended the delegates meeting in Broadmeadows, "which was the first delegates meeting I have ever attended. One woman in the meeting got up and said, this is all backwards, we have filled out our vote before the discussion has taken place—when it is too late to change our vote. People had to push to even have a discussion at that meeting—the union was trying to stifle the discussion. I felt that we were being encouraged not to stay and talk. We were told that [AEU president] Meredith Peace would talk for an hour, and you didn't need to stay if you didn't want to—again not wanting people to stay, or for the opposition to say what the

other side of things was.”

Amanda said that the procedural motion from the SEP members had been important, because it gave “less time to Peace. We had read all that spin from the union and we needed to hear more from other people. I know in other meetings the union stopped the discussion from people who wanted to vote no, by not having people speak in favor, and then putting the resolution. There were plenty of people who wanted to speak against it but they didn’t get a chance. The room was clearly wanting to hear from people who had a different opinion.”

She said that even though the procedural motion, moved by the SEP members, on the democratic right to speak, had been passed, “the union still tried to stop the discussion.”

The discussion that did take place, Amanda pointed out, “on peer observations was important. People need to be mindful that other states are having inspectors come in, and I fear that we might go down that road. The material that came up about the educational reform and the Bracks review was very troubling. Meredith Peace said that the government had not signed off on this, but that was not true. That leaves a bad taste in your mouth when there is clear evidence to say the opposite.”

Amanda registered her surprise at the outcome of the vote at the meeting, saying she thought it would have been “overwhelmingly ‘no,’ because a lot of people were opposed ... I think people voted without understanding the nitty-gritty of the agreement.”

Speaking against the standardised testing regime, Amanda said that opposition to it had been growing every year. “What is happening is the narrowing of the curriculum and not enough time on creating well-rounded individuals. We need to develop students who can problem solve and think for themselves.”

Pointing to the influence of the SEP’s Facebook page, she said, “I think it is really great that you are putting the other side and delving into it ... I read the agreement but I probably missed the fine detail that you guys highlighted. I was mad when, as the union contact person in our school, I received an email from the union urging me to encourage a ‘yes’ vote, which I think is appalling.

“I probably previously thought myself a bit of a unionist in the past, and naively understood [the union]

to be something that fought for my rights and my colleagues’ rights. But through this process, even more than 2013, I feel disappointed. The union never came back to us during the negotiations and said, ‘what do you think of the government’s offer? Should we fight for more?’ They never used the workload survey to get what we needed.

“I guess I am feeling really disappointed in the union,” Amanda concluded, “and when you talk about independent committees or councils fighting for our rights—I think that is a great idea.”

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To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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