# Australian teachers support campaign against AEU-government deal

**Our reporters**
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*This is the second of two articles containing interviews conducted by the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) with teachers who attended the recent Australian Education Union delegates' meetings in the state of Victoria. The first can be read here.*

*The AEU called the meetings for delegates to cast an indicative vote on a new four-year agreement , which union officials had already 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 all Victorian public school teachers.*

*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, Socialist Equality Party members and supporters who are teachers—and were elected by their union branches as delegates—were able to move resolutions upholding the democratic right of teachers to speak. At others, the AEU blocked them. At several meetings, however, SEP representatives spoke against the deal, exposing in detail why teachers should vote "No."*

*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 the deal in a secret ballot. SEP members and supporters are campaigning among rank-and-file teachers and ES staff for a "No" vote.*

**Judith**, a secondary teacher who attended the delegates' meeting in Springvale, was critical of the way the union officials ran it. "Most teachers' knowledge of the agreement is very limited," she said. "The whole process was very undemocratic. There should be mass meetings where everyone can hear everyone else."

Judith pointed out that even her own understanding of the contents of the deal was limited. "We just got told by one of the people on union state council that not much had changed in the agreement. We are so busy and don't have time to spend reading such a long document. I went to the ratification meeting in 2013. A few people tried to put forward the 'no' case. But the union got all the time to speak. It was futile really. You put your hand up to speak and it's all them. This time I put the 'no' vote in at the start and left."

Judith referred to the "Bracks report," a document drawn-up by former Victorian Labor premier Steve Bracks, which advocates an accelerated assault on teachers' jobs and working conditions, including school amalgamations, and intensified teacher surveillance tied to performance. "The government and the union seem to agree with the Bracks report," she observed. "I read your article on what the union is suppressing. The report actually mentions how schools should change their compositions to lower costs. It's not in that language, but that is what is meant."

Concerned about the impact of the latest measures on older teachers, Judith commented: "I previously applied to freedom of information because I noticed so many teachers named as excess were more than 50 years-old. I found that of 416 teachers in excess since 2013, 363 are classification 2 (older teachers). It's not meant to be based on the amount you cost."

**Jess**, a primary school teacher of six years standing, spoke to the SEP after attending the Meadow Heights delegates' meeting. "The whole process at the meeting was extremely undemocratic," she said. "I'm not sure why there had to be a resolution put for democratic discussion to happen. Surely that should happen naturally?"

Jess also criticised the way the meeting was run. "When we arrived, we had to vote. Then you had what

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I call a ‘semi’ discussion. Clearly what the union were looking for was one answer. Walking into the meeting, the union guy who greeted us said ‘Meredith Peace [AEU Victoria President] is going to speak for an hour and you don’t have to stay. You can pop your vote in and head off if you like.’

“When we walked in,” she continued, “there were hardly any chairs set up, just a handful—three rows. I was thinking, are we the only ones staying? We were going to stay, of course, but imagine if you came and saw that! You would think, maybe I’ll vote and go.”

Jess warned that such anti-democratic measures had been planned. “You need to read between the lines on all these things,” she said. “This was a conscious thing by the union. From the beginning the process has been intentional. This was all announced just before end of holidays. It doesn’t just happen like that. They [the AEU] did, in many ways, try and stop discussion and put a lid on it.”

Referring to the immense workloads teachers face, with an average of 15 hours’ overtime being worked by Victorian teachers each week, Jess pointed out that “the union made a big deal of workload, half way through last year, and it is the biggest problem facing teachers. It is not wages, it is workload. This issue has not been addressed whatsoever.”

“Workload, or the lack of a solution, is one of the main things that they did not want exposed,” she added. “Nothing was done to address workload—and they knew they hadn’t addressed it too.”

Jess went on to draw out other measures in the agreement that the union had not raised in schools, or at the delegates’ meetings.

“The fact that performance and the development review online and peer observations were somehow snuck in there by the union is really frightening. Peer observation happens at our school, but it is by choice. The fact that it is now mandatory makes you feel that they are checking up on you—not that it is some benefit.

“With the vote, I feel teachers and ES [Education Support] staff haven’t had the opportunity to read it or hear the other side. I know of people through social media who like the AEU site, but they only read the bullet points, because they only have time to read these things. They are only reading what has been sent to them. If you only look at those things, then it sounds pretty good.

“There is an overwhelming vote for yes, because people don’t get the opportunity to hear the other side and read between the lines. All you need is one voice in a branch to represent the opposition, to bring your attention to all the other facts that the union is not talking about. Unfortunately, not all schools have that. I really think that is the reason why there has been a yes vote.”

Jess was concerned that teachers would respond to the vote statistics, released by the union after the delegates’ meetings, by thinking that the agreement “must be good.” The vote was 82 percent “Yes” and 18 percent “No.”

She noted: “It is a real pressure. Imagine you are a person who voted yes at the delegates meeting, and the data had come out the other way around—that the majority had voted no. Then you are sitting there thinking ‘Oh! What have I not read? What haven’t I realized?’ Then you are probably going to go back and have a proper look.”

Referring to the discussion at the Meadow Heights meeting, where SEP members had insisted on a democratic discussion and put forward the case for a “No” vote, Jess said: “I think if everyone had been at the Meadow Heights meeting and heard the discussion, it would have been a much closer vote. Who is going to bother to sit down and read a lengthy document, when all the voices around you are saying ‘yes,’ ‘yes,’ ‘yes’?”

*To contact Teachers and ES Staff against the Victorian Education Agreement, visit our* Facebook page.

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