

Australian Education Union pushes through pro-market workplace agreement in Victoria

Susan Allan, Linda Tenenbaum
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According to results published last week by the Australian Education Union (AEU), 87.4 percent of teachers, Education Support (ES) staff and principals in Victoria voted to approve its new four-year Enterprise Bargaining Agreement (EBA) on salaries and working conditions with the state Labor government. The union reported that 47,219 employees voted “yes,” and 6,528 voted “no,” out of a total of around 70,000. Some 29 percent of eligible voters, or nearly a third, abstained.

For the state and federal governments, the endorsement of the agreement opens the way for an acceleration of their destructive pro-market agenda, which has created a systemic crisis in public education and is driving the continuous expansion of the private school system.

For teachers and ES staff, the deal is a significant setback and represents another in a long series of abject betrayals by the AEU.

When Meredith Peace, the president of the AEU Victoria, announced the deal to the media last March, she declared it was a “significant gain,” and “a great win for our members.”

In reality, the agreement means:

- Excessive workloads will continue. A union survey last year found that, on average, teachers work 14–15 unpaid hours per week on top of their scheduled hours, leading to mental health and family problems and undermining student learning. The agreement makes no change to face-to-face teaching time, class sizes or understaffing.
- Insecure employment and contracts also continue. All the loopholes that existed for principals to avoid transferring contract teachers to permanent status still exist.
- Teaching staff have suffered a real wage cut. The union accepted that there would be no back-pay to compensate for inflation since the last increase in October 2015.
- Standardised testing of students such as NAPLAN will intensify. Teachers will be under greater pressure through a regime of increased surveillance and monitoring of school and teacher performance. The agreement creates a new teacher category—“Learning Specialists.” The role of these highly paid “specialists” will be to develop protocols for mandatory peer observation and the use of data for “whole school improvement,” creating the conditions for the sacking of teachers accused of “unsatisfactory” performance.

The question posed by the “yes” vote is why did most teaching staff ratify an agreement that is so clearly opposed to their interests and the interests of their students, and that deepens the assault on the social right to public education?

The answer lies firstly in the role of the AEU and the various political tendencies operating within the union that worked to assist it in misinforming teachers and ES staff, preventing discussion on the real content of the agreement, and isolating and silencing opposition.

Secondly, it reflects the current lack of any alternative perspective among teaching staff for taking forward a fight against the pro-market agenda of governments and the unions.

The three-month 2017 EBA voting process was a consciously orchestrated affront to democratic procedure from start to finish.

For the first time in two decades, the AEU called no mass meetings or industrial action of any kind during its 12 months of negotiations with the Andrews Labor government. This was in sharp contrast to the 2013 EBA process, which saw three of the largest-ever mass meetings of teachers and ES staff, along with rolling stoppages and work-to-rule bans.

The union signed off on the 2017 EBA just days before teachers were set to vote for protected industrial action, and on the eve of the term holiday break. Local union branches had only nine working days after the holiday break to read and debate it before electing delegates to attend the first AEU ratification meetings.

Teachers were deluged with glossy posters and union summaries calling for a “yes” vote. Many, overworked and with little time to spare, were reliant on these brief and misleading summaries. Teachers were not encouraged to read the 50-page document and the majority did not do so. Very little, if any, discussion was held in most schools. In some, meetings were not even organised to nominate delegates.

The pseudo-left organisations, Socialist Alliance and Socialist Alternative—both of which have representatives on the AEU’s state council—collaborated throughout with the union apparatus. After the agreement was announced, they claimed it contained “some improvements” and took no action whatsoever in opposition to its content or the anti-democratic manner in which a “yes” vote was being pushed.

From the outset, teachers and ES staff who are members or supporters of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) campaigned vigorously for a “no” vote, in direct opposition to the union. Several detailed critiques of the agreement were prepared and published on the *World Socialist Web Site*, and circulated through social media and other means. The SEP stressed that there was a direct relationship between the contents of the agreement and the anti-democratic methods that were being used to ram it through.

Without the forum of a mass meeting, teachers who were aware of the EBA’s implications began denouncing it on the official AEU Facebook page, emphasising the fact that unmanageable workloads had not been addressed. Some characterised it as another AEU betrayal and, in disgust, threatened to leave the union. In response, the AEU deleted such comments. Also removed were the comments from teachers who posted links to the analysis presented on the WSWWS.

SEP members and supporters responded by establishing their own

Facebook page—“Teachers and ES staff against the Victorian Education Agreement.” WSWs articles were posted to the page, including interviews with different layers of teachers, aimed at raising awareness and encouraging debate and discussion. Thousands of teachers in both metropolitan and regional areas read this material, with many participating in online discussions.

Prior to AEU delegates’ meetings, the SEP Facebook page published a video appeal by SEP member Will Marshall, calling for a “no” vote and the formation of rank-and-file committees at schools, to develop a struggle for the rights of teaching staff and students, independently of the AEU. The video was widely shared and commented upon, with some teachers convening meetings in their schools to move resolutions for their delegates to oppose the EBA.

From May 1, the union began the bureaucratically-controlled delegate “ratification” meetings. Their sole purpose was to insist upon a “yes” vote, which could then be used to present the deal as a fait accompli before the secret ballot, in which all public school employees—union and non-union—would be voting on the agreement.

At the first meeting in central Melbourne, SEP members moved a procedural motion limiting the time that the union leadership could speak, in order to facilitate a full democratic discussion and debate. While it narrowly lost, it opened up the meeting for wider discussion.

At every meeting AEU officials encouraged delegates to simply place their vote in the ballot box and leave, rather than stay for discussion. At most meetings, union officials spoke for at least an hour, while opponents of the deal were allowed just three minutes. At Meadow Heights, a working-class suburb, the SEP resolution was resoundingly passed, with several teachers jumping to their feet to speak in favour.

The AEU reported that 1,554 delegates voted for the deal, with 334 against—82 percent to 18, and issued a stream of emails calling for teachers to follow suit and vote “yes” in the forthcoming secret ballot.

The manner in which the secret ballot was conducted raises disturbing questions. In many schools the required meetings were not held, teachers were not provided with the official ballot paper, ES staff were excluded from the meetings, or meetings were held when they could not attend.

The Department of Education stipulated that the votes be counted by the school principal and the AEU representative, who were directed to email the results directly to the department. No independent oversight was carried out. Moreover, the department directed principals, without any opposition from the union, to destroy all ballot papers once the results had been emailed, making any check or recount impossible, and it has refused to make public the results from individual schools.

Even before the results were announced, the AEU began implementing the agreement, offering professional development courses to selected teachers for the new “Learning Specialist” position.

Teachers approached the secret ballot vote in a variety of ways. Some, invariably those close to the bureaucracy and/or the Labor Party, were for the agreement. A significant number were swayed by the duplicitous AEU propaganda that it delivered genuine improvements, or felt pressured to vote “yes” because the deal had been endorsed by the delegates’ meetings.

The 12 percent of teachers and ES staff who voted “no,” did so with considerable determination and consciousness. In many cases, they had sought further information on the content of the agreement and had only found it on the SEP’s Facebook page. They opposed the deal not only on the more immediate issues of workload and other

conditions, but on the broader questions raised by the SEP regarding the government-union agenda of standardised testing, performance-ranking, and the privatisation of the public school system.

In one case, for example, an experienced teacher requested SEP material, then prepared a report based on the SEP’s analysis and presented it to a staff meeting. At her school, as well as at others where SEP members and supporters campaigned among their colleagues, the result was an overwhelming “no” vote. At nine Melbourne metropolitan schools, where the SEP had a strong and known influence, 61 percent of teachers and ES staff voted “no”—a highly significant response.

At three schools with SEP members on staff, the “no” vote among 233 teachers and ES staff was an extraordinary 78.5 percent.

Those who did reject the agreement had, in the main, accessed truthful information, and were able to defy the pressure applied by the union apparatus to accept its sordid deal with the Labor government.

The SEP played the critical role in providing them with information, analyses, political leadership and an alternative political perspective. This was the most important outcome of the entire three-month process.

A firm base of opposition to the agenda of the government and the union now exists—as many as 12 percent of Victorian teachers and ES staff—to develop a political movement in the working class against the destruction of the social right to free, universal, secular and high-quality public education, and in defence of all the fundamental social rights of the working class.

For such a movement to go forward, it must base itself on the fight for a socialist program, and a workers’ government, which will place the financial institutions and transnational corporations under public ownership and the democratic control of the working class, the vast majority of society.

This is the urgent political task posed by the outcome of the 2017 Enterprise Bargaining Agreement in Victoria.

The authors also recommend:

Teachers and ES staff against the Victorian Education Agreement



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