

The Australian Education Union's 2017 campaign of misinformation and censorship

Susan Allan, Linda Tenenbaum
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Returning to work after a two-week break, Victorian public school teachers are facing the full consequences of the treacherous sell-out deal brokered by the Australian Education Union (AEU) with the state Labor government. The new four-year Enterprise Bargaining Agreement (EBA) will perpetuate untenable workloads and the non-permanent employment of thousands of contract teachers and Education Support (ES) staff, while institutionalising the notorious and regressive standardised testing regime as the primary focus of the state's public education system.

AEU officials, fully cognizant of the impact of two decades of ever-worsening conditions in schools and rising anger among teachers, understood that to get a majority "Yes" vote on the EBA would require a highly conscious and deliberate operation to block, suppress and sideline growing teacher and ES opposition. Its three-month campaign was anti-democratic from start to finish.

In the course of the union's year-long negotiations, conducted behind closed doors with the government throughout 2016, it commissioned a survey on workload, involving 13,000 teachers, principals and ES staff. The survey revealed that many teachers had reached breaking point; the majority were working more than 53 hours a week, with 15 hours unpaid; and workload pressures were driving many to quit the profession.

Ten days before announcing the union's final deal with the government, AEU President Meredith Peace threatened to authorise industrial action over the "major sticking point" of workload. The government was refusing to reduce face-to-face teaching time by just one hour, because it would cost \$800 million over the course of the EBA. The union's response? It withdrew its token workload demand and signed off on a deal that, to all intents and purposes, maintained the status quo. It also called off any industrial action.

This was the first time in decades that the AEU had organised no mass meetings, work stoppages, strikes or work-to-rule bans to push for government concessions. Only four years earlier, during the 2013 EBA negotiations, three of the largest teacher mass meetings ever held had voted for industrial action, with 30,000 teachers participating in a work stoppage and 10,000 attending the final mass meeting. At that time, the union's supporters in the pseudo-left feigned opposition to the EBA, proposing "left" amendments in order to channel the growing militancy back behind the AEU.

Four years later, Peace and other bureaucrats, along with pseudo-lefts Mary Merkenich from Socialist Alliance and Lucy Honan

from Solidarity, who sit on the AEU state council, were terrified that any such action could rapidly escalate out of their control. This time, after claiming the agreement contained "some improvements," the pseudo-lefts remained virtually silent, allowing the union to proceed to ram the agreement through.

Meanwhile, the AEU was censoring its Facebook page, eliminating any oppositional posts from teachers or exposure of the EBA, such as links to articles on the *World Socialist Web Site*, or any mention of the Socialist Equality Party and its campaign for a "no" vote.

During the three months from March to June, the union ratcheted up its campaign of censorship, misinformation and lies. No expense was spared. AEU bureaucrats travelled throughout the state, addressing numerous delegates' "ratification" meetings, on the benefits of a deal whose measures were the precise opposite of what the union was claiming they were. While officials spoke for an hour to put the "yes" case, delegates who wished to put the case for a "no" vote were either passed over, or allowed just three minutes.

As well, any motions for mass meetings to be held were simply ruled out of order, and no amendments to the EBA or the official resolution endorsing it were permitted.

Officially, the delegates' meetings carried no weight in the final ballot on the EBA. They were organized in order to present the mass of teachers and ES staff with a fait accompli. If a large majority of delegates could be cajoled to vote "yes," then this would place added pressure on all teachers to follow suit. Few delegates, let alone the vast majority of teachers and ES staff, had the time to read and assimilate the contents of the 50-page legal document. Officials even suggested to delegates that they could simply place their vote in the box and leave without hearing any of the reports or discussion.

At the same time, the union was dispatching large glossy posters to every primary and secondary public school, where they were prominently displayed. One, for example, read:

Vote Yes! Your AEU in-principle Schools Agreement features:

REDUCED WORKLOAD

PAY INCREASES

THOUSANDS OF CONTRACTS TO BECOME ONGOING

We've fought for improvements on workload and contracts.

This enterprise agreement delivers for you.

Vote Yes!

Activate. Educate. Unite.

At none of the delegates' meetings did union officials point out that embedded in the EBA was the adoption of measures proposed in the "Bracks Review"—which will mean an escalation of the pro-market, privatisation agenda now underpinning public education in Australia. Nor was there mention that it endorsed the increased role of the NAPLAN standardised testing regime in determining teacher and school performance, which has become the source of immense anger and frustration among teachers, parents and students.

Between June 13 and June 20, a government-mandated secret ballot was conducted at all Victorian public schools. According to both the Education Department and the union, the outcome was a resounding "yes" vote by 87.5 percent of school staff.

This may be an accurate figure. If it is, then the union and their pseudo-left stooges are fully responsible. Theirs was a conscious and deliberate operation to subordinate angry, fed-up and frustrated school employees to the Labor government's ever-deepening cost-cutting and privatisation agenda.

On the other hand, the reported result of the secret ballot may be false—but, if it is, no-one will ever know. That is because the voting procedure, set down by the Education Department, and conducted under the auspices of the Fair Work Act 2009, made a mockery of teachers' democratic rights.

Principals were directed, in a letter from the Department, to conduct, together with a union representative, scheduled meetings of all employees at their schools, ensure a roll was taken at the meeting, provide each voting staff member with a ballot paper, instruct them to place their ballot in a box, ensure the ballot box was in safe-keeping, count the ballots, and then email the Department of Education before 5pm on June 20, with the results from their school.

Extraordinarily, the Department's final instruction was to insist on "destroying individual ballot papers after the principal and the union representative have completed the ... form and after the Department has been notified of the result." Moreover, when the AEU and the Department were telephoned and asked, the next day, for the ballot results at individual schools, both the government and the union declared that no such information would be forthcoming.

These decisions mean that teachers have been left in the dark about exactly how and where the union's sell-out achieved such a historically high vote. And it is now impossible to investigate any concerns that those who voted may have with the results.

What *is* known is that at nine Melbourne metropolitan schools, where the Socialist Equality Party had a strong and known influence, 61 percent of teachers and ES staff voted "no"—a highly significant response.

There have been many reported irregularities with the vote. Principals at some schools failed to call meetings—which may

account for the nearly 29 percent of eligible voters who failed to cast a ballot. It may also mean that many teachers had no opportunity to hear the case for a "no" vote.

In other schools, meetings were held, but ES staff, who suffer the most exploitative conditions, were informed that they did not need to attend, and were simply eliminated from the ballot. At others, ballot papers were not distributed. At one such meeting, staff were asked to write their vote on a sticky note.

The principal at another school informed staff that there was no time for a meeting. He assumed that most teachers would vote "yes." He instructed those who wished to vote "no" to email their vote, indicating a degree of influence, if not coercion.

The *Fair Work Act 2009*, the mechanism under which all unions conduct votes and secret ballots, provides for no independent oversight or supervision. This plays into the hands of the unions, which remain completely unanswerable to their memberships.

As the experience of the 2017 Victorian public education EBA demonstrates, there is a direct relationship between the anti-working class content of the agreement and the anti-democratic methods utilized by the AEU to push it through. It serves to underscore, yet again, that the AEU is not, in any meaningful sense of the term, a "workers' organization" or "union."

The AEU does not organize struggles, but imposes defeats. It is an outfit that exists to carry out the dictates of whichever government is in office and, more essentially, to facilitate the process of privatization to meet the profit interests of the major corporations and financial institutions. It does not fight for salary increases, or fair workloads, or secure and permanent jobs. Nor does it oppose the substitution of genuine education with a testing regime that has alienated and undermined virtually the entire school community.

The AEU cannot be reformed. To fight for a high-quality, free, and accessible public education for all, teachers must build new fighting organisations, with rank-and-file committees elected in every school, oriented to workers in all industries, workplaces and areas, in a common struggle for the democratic and social rights of the working class, throughout Australia and internationally.

Such a struggle requires leadership and a political party—the Socialist Equality Party. The SEP was the only party that fought for the interests of teachers and ES staff against the AEU and the Labor government, because it advances the fight for international socialism against the capitalist system itself.

We urge teachers and ES staff who want to develop the fight for public education to join the SEP.



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