

Australian Education Union announces phony “week of action” over Victorian teachers’ workplace agreement

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The Australian Education Union (AEU) in Victoria is currently promoting a “week of action” for teachers as part of its discussions with the state Labor government on a new industrial agreement covering public schools.

The union’s initiative would be more accurately described as a “week of diversions.” Suggested activities consist of teachers wearing red clothes to work, downloading an AEU poster for staff rooms, detailing schoolwork done on weekends via social media, and attending an online union meeting to hear a report from the bureaucracy on a recently conducted teacher opinion survey on working conditions and on its behind closed doors discussions with the government on the new industrial agreement.

Negotiated every three to four years, the agreements covering public school teachers’ wages and conditions have served as important mechanisms for advancing the assault on public education that has been undertaken by successive Labor and Liberal governments, state and federal. The AEU works against teachers’ interests, enforcing near zero real wage increases while agreeing to even worse working conditions. The outcome is the current disaster within the public education system, with underfunded schools, increasing privatisation, overworked teachers, and regressive pedagogical measures driven by NAPLAN standardised tests imposed on students.

The development of a new industrial agreement ought to be the trigger for a unified political struggle of teachers, education support (ES) staff and other school workers for decent wages and conditions, and for a genuinely free, accessible, high quality public education system.

For AEU officials, however, behind closed doors

discussions with state government representatives are about devising how many more so-called productivity concessions and “educational reform” measures they can get away with imposing on teachers and school staff.

According to initial AEU reports, nothing has yet been agreed in the negotiations that have been underway for the last four months. The “log of claims” submitted by the union includes a grab bag of demands, including 7 percent annual wage rises, additional superannuation payments, a cap on class sizes of 20 students and a reduction in weekly face to face teaching time to a maximum of 18 hours, with fewer hours for teachers in the first three years of their career. These measures would amount to a modest contribution towards alleviating the untenable working conditions endured by many teachers—yet it can be safely predicted that not a single one of them will be included in the final agreement signed off on by the AEU and the state government.

Notably absent from the log of claims is any mention of previous workplace concessions imposed by the AEU, which will remain in place without discussion. These include a 2013 agreement provision that fast-tracked “unsatisfactory performance” mechanisms to allow targeted teachers to be sacked in as little as 13 weeks.

Since coming to office in 2014, the Labor government of Premier Daniel Andrews has advanced the interests of big business and finance capital, including through privatisations of public assets and delivering budget surpluses to satisfy the credit ratings agencies. In early 2020, the government was preparing budget cuts totalling \$4 billion, however the

coronavirus-triggered slump forced it to instead prop up the economy through limited spending measures. Now there is a growing clamour within ruling circles for a return to austerity measures against the working class.

The government has refused anything other than minimal wage concessions to public sector workers, with an official 2 percent annual cap. Slightly higher rates in recently imposed agreements—a 3 percent annual wage rise for nurses, for example—have included so-called productivity concessions eroding conditions.

The AEU is attempting to cultivate illusions in the Labor government. Teachers are being directed to “campaign hubs” across the state, whose nominal purpose is to lobby politicians. A union publication explained: “Campaign hubs will be seeking meetings with local MPs [...] We need government politicians and the broader community to understand the impact of excessive workloads on members’ lives, on your feelings about your work, and on your capacity to meet the needs of your students.”

As if the problem confronting teachers is that politicians are not aware of the state of the public education system that they themselves have helped engineer!

The so-called campaign hubs are a cover for the AEU’s determined refusal to mobilise teachers. The last time the union organised any form of industrial action in Victoria was in 2013. The last agreement was rammed through in 2017 without a single mass meeting being held. There is every reason to believe that the union aims to even more rapidly, and with even less discussion, push through a deal this year with the state government.

There is enormous anger and opposition within the schools. The AEU’s Facebook page, even though frequently censored by union bureaucrats, gives some indication of the sentiments. Intolerable workloads are repeatedly raised: “I’ve been teaching for over 20 years and our workloads are greater now than they have ever been,” a typical comment reads. “I don’t know how graduate teachers survive (they don’t) [...] AEU do something!!! I’m starting to lose faith. A tired, over worked teacher and it’s only term 2, week 2.”

Distrust in and hostility towards the union is also evident. One social media comment stated: “I don’t believe this union has the ability to bring the government to the bargaining table; much like the last

agreement where we witnessed little pay increase, no difference to meeting times and contact hours, and useless and abused PPDs [professional practice days] to handle workload issues. Pathetic.” Another stated: “Yep I am over the AEU. Great at producing useless stationery but not worth the yearly fee. Will be cancelling my membership.”

Teachers and school staff need to take their struggle for proper working conditions and an adequately funded public education system out of the hands of the union bureaucracy. Action needs to be developed before the AEU unveils yet another sell-out agreement! The fight for a decent agreement and for a public education system worthy of the name is above all a political fight against the state Labor government which stands opposed to teachers and school staff.

Rank and file committees ought to be formed in every primary and secondary school, and the widest discussion developed among teachers and school staff. The Committee for Public Education will provide every assistance to those seeking to take forward this struggle. Contact us today and get involved!

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