

Australian Education Union's anti-democratic “town hall” meeting underscores danger of new sell-out industrial agreement

Our reporter
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An online meeting convened on Wednesday evening by the Australian Education Union (AEU) in Victoria revealed some aspects of the bureaucracy's behind closed doors discussions with the state Labor government for a new industrial agreement covering the state's public school teachers, along with education support and other school staff.

The meeting was held during a so-called “week of action” called by the union, after the expiration of the previous industrial agreement that was rammed through in 2017 (see “Australian Education Union announces phony ‘week of action’ over Victorian teachers’ workplace agreement”). Few teachers knew about this union initiative, and less than 400 of the more than 50,000 AEU members in Victoria attended Wednesday's online meeting.

Both the form and content of the event pointed to the AEU's collaboration with the state government of Premier Daniel Andrews and its readiness to help draft and enforce a new agreement that further worsens teachers' and school workers' conditions within the crisis-stricken public education system.

The union bureaucracy convened the event through Zoom and utilised every option to run it as anti-democratically as they could—disabling the standard chat box, keeping participants on permanent mute, and preventing people from even clicking “raise hand.”

An official opened the event by explaining that it was not a “formal meeting” and so “there won't be anything like motions.” The hour-long meeting was carefully stage managed, designed to pre-empt any discussion among teachers of the situation they confront. The overarching concern was to block Committee for Public Education (CFPE) members from raising their perspective of taking the struggle for decent wages and conditions for school workers and for a genuinely accessible and high quality

public education system out of the hands of the union bureaucracy.

The first part of the meeting comprised a report on the findings of a union survey of more than 10,000 teachers and school staff related to workload. This, unsurprisingly, relayed intolerable working conditions, involving enormous levels of unpaid overtime. Nearly 90 percent reported that excessive workloads adversely affected their health, with almost one in four respondents stating that this occurred “always” or “nearly always.”

Union officials made no attempt to explain these findings in relation to their boasts in 2017, when they unveiled the last industrial agreement. Four years ago, Victorian AEU president Meredith Peace declared that the “fair and reasonable” agreement addressed workload by introducing once a term “professional practice days,” during which a relief teacher takes teachers' classes while they do planning, assessment, or professional development work. A glossy poster sent to every public school urged a “yes” vote on the basis that: “Your AEU in-principle Schools Agreement features: **REDUCED WORKLOAD.**”

With this recent lying history passed over, the online meeting then saw a brief report from Peace on the latest discussions between the AEU bureaucracy and the state government.

This report, it was emphasised by the union, could only be provided verbally because of “good faith” bargaining provisions that it agreed to with the Department of Education and the government. The refusal to provide written updates on the discussions means that only a small minority of public school teachers and staff have any idea of the behind-closed-doors discussions on issues that may determine their working conditions for the next several years.

Describing these discussions as “negotiations” is misleading if this were to be interpreted as some form of adversarial standoff involving opposing parties. In reality, the AEU is an accomplice of the state government, working against teachers and school workers. Peace began her report on the agreement discussions not by speaking about the government’s response to the union’s log of claims—which include various wage and workload requests that the union has no intention of actually fighting for—but instead by elaborating on new demands being issued by the Department of Education.

This began with the demand for a “10 week leave model”—a change in leave arrangements that could see teachers having to work in schools between terms, if they have not worked enough hours to accumulate sufficient sick and other leave. Peace declared that there were “negatives” and “positives” to the Department’s proposal, but emphasised that the AEU was “willing to have this discussion.”

Other issues relate to workload. Peace admitted that discussions have been “more general” than anything involving specific proposals to reduce face to face teaching time. An “index model” has been floated, potentially involving a trade-off between class size numbers and face to face teaching hours. This is a formula for betrayal—the bureaucracy is already flagging its willingness to abandon the log of claims’ request for a maximum 18 hours a week face to face teaching time, and the 20-student class size cap.

Likewise on the issues of wages, Peace left little doubt that the 7 percent annual raise claim will be jettisoned. The AEU begins not with what public school teachers and staff actually require, but rather with what the government says it can fund. The government, Peace insisted, “has a very clear public sector wages policy” involving a 2 percent annual cap, and it was being “very stringent” and “very strict” on this point in the negotiations. Wages would be discussed at the end of the negotiations, Peace explained, because of the “cost implications.”

Related issues for principals and super-exploited education support (ES) staff were also raised, again with little discussion on concrete issues discussed.

Following Peace’s report on the so-called negotiations, the AEU official chairing the meeting declared that there was only eight to nine minutes for questions and answers. Questions could only be submitted in writing, with AEU officials selectively choosing the ones to be read aloud to the Zoom meeting. Among many questions ignored were those with multiple “thumbs up” gestures of support,

several of which were posed by members of the CFPE.

On the question of potential strike action, Peace emphasised that there were “strict laws under the Fair Work Act,” referring to anti-democratic industrial legislation that was previously drafted by the unions in collaboration with the former federal Labor government. The unions use these laws to stymie any movement of workers outside their control. Peace explained that industrial action was only legal once approved by Fair Work Australia, after negotiations could be said to have broken down. This had not happened, she added, with union and government officials continuing to meet twice a week for 2–3 hour long discussions.

The meeting underscored the urgency of the CFPE’s call for teachers to take the struggle for decent working conditions and for a properly funded and freely accessible public education system out of the hands of the AEU bureaucracy. This means forming independent rank-and-file committees in every school, and developing a struggle against the state Labor government on the basis of a democratic discussion among educators involving the need to turn out to other sections of the working class, as well as students, parents, and others concerned about the fate of the public education system.

The starting point for a new agreement must be not what the government and union deems “affordable” within a pandemic-driven austerity drive, but rather what is necessary to deliver decent working conditions for teachers and school staff and proper educational facilities for all public school students.

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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