Australian Education Union imposes limited school work bans in Victoria

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8 November 2021

Public school teachers in the state of Victoria are this week implementing additional work bans organised by the Australian Education Union (AEU), as part of its efforts to finalise a new industrial agreement with the state Labor government.

The strictly limited measures include prohibitions on state Labor parliamentarians visiting schools, a ban on implementing online trial NAPLAN standardised tests and on education support (ES) staff doing duties during unpaid lunch breaks. These are in addition to measures imposed from last month—attending only one of the usual two after school hours meetings each week, not responding to certain Department of Education emails, and not implementing "FISO 2.0," the second version of the so-called Framework for Improving Student Outcomes that outlines the government's agenda for the schools.

None of these authorised bans serve to disrupt the business of the government and its Department of Education. The AEU is using them as an alibi for its refusal to authorise strike action.

Tensions are escalating within the schools. Of the more than 50,000 teacher and school staff members of the AEU, 97 percent voted in September in favour of industrial action. The central issue, as with previous industrial agreements covering the public schools, is excessive workload. Enormous unpaid overtime is worked each week, as teachers are confronted with ever increasing expectations that more tasks will be carried out including administration, assessment and reporting, family communication, and student learning responsibilities. Numerous teachers confronting these pressures are quitting the profession, including approximately one in every three graduate teachers within their first five years of working.

The COVID-19 situation has exacerbated the crisis. Teachers in Melbourne have worked through what had been one of the world's longest cumulative lockdowns, providing remote learning to their students in highly challenging conditions.

This term the government, with the full support of the AEU, has dragooned teachers and school staff back into the schools amid ongoing, high-level community transmission of the virus. The union has refused to make public the tally of affected schools. The Committee for Public Education has counted more than 400 schools affected by outbreaks in the last five weeks, publicising these outbreaks in the face of an attempted government and union blackout.

Education is now by far the worst COVID-hit industry, significantly ahead of the aged care, child care, and health care sectors. Several schools have emerged as major infection clusters—suggesting that the reopenings may have caused super spreader events. Northern Bay Western College Wexford Campus has 56 infections, while Stockwell Road and Morwell Park primary schools, both in the Latrobe Valley working class regional area, have 31 and 30 infections respectively.

From the outset of the pandemic, the bureaucracy has supported and helped enforce every official diktat. The only response of the AEU to the latest infection spike has been to insist it is up to individual schools and their occupational health and safety representatives to respond to the situation.

The next three-year industrial agreement and the rushed reopening of the schools in pandemic conditions are interconnected issues and ought to be dealt with together in a unified industrial and political struggle of teachers and school workers.

The AEU's priority is to block the emergence of such a movement. Union state president Meredith

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Peace all but ruled out any stop work industrial action in an interview with the *Age* last month. The newspaper reported that she was "unwilling to disadvantage students as they progressively return to face-to-face learning in term four."

The real disadvantage confronting students is not the threat of teacher strikes but rather the ongoing and chronic lack of resources provided to their public schools. While elite private institutions provide the best facilities money can buy for the privileged children of the ultra-wealthy, Victorian public schools remain the lowest funded in the country, on a per-student basis. Teachers and staff are over-worked and under-paid.

The AEU and Department of Education representatives have been negotiating behind closed doors for nearly 12 months. The limited updates on these secretive discussions provided by the union—delivered verbally in members' meetings, as the bureaucracy has agreed not to write anything about the negotiations—have made clear that the government is not prepared to make any significant concessions whatsoever.

The Labor government of Premier Daniel Andrews is preparing austerity budget cuts, and has insisted on a 2 percent annual wage rise ceiling for public sector workers. This would represent a real wage cut for teachers amid an escalating cost of living.

The union has previously reported that the Department has a list of new measures it wants to impose on teachers. This includes a "10 week leave model," within which teachers could be forced to attend school for work during holidays between terms, if they have not worked enough hours to accumulate sufficient sick and other leave.

Other outstanding issues relate to workload. The union has already flagged its willingness to junk the proposal outlined in its log of claims for a maximum 18 hours a week face to face teaching time, and the 20-student class size cap. Instead of such limits, department and union officials are reportedly haggling over the details of a new "index model" that effectively forces a trade-off between any reduction in face to face teaching hours with a corresponding increase in class sizes.

The current crisis in the public education system has been deliberately engineered by the ruling elite in Australia, in part via regressive industrial agreements imposed on school teachers and staff in Victoria and every other state and territory.

Teachers and school staff now must make active preparations to oppose any regressive deal cooked up by the AEU and the state government. No more sell out agreements! No more "productivity" concessions and other give-aways!

The campaign for decent wages and working conditions in the public education system must be taken out of the hands of the union bureaucracy, and taken forward in tandem with the fight to protect the health and safety of staff and students by closing schools in conditions of continued COVID-19 transmission.

Such a fight, based on the widest circulation of accurate scientific information on the pandemic and what is required to eliminate the coronavirus, would receive enormous support throughout the working class. What is required is the formation of rank-and-file committees in every school, independent of the AEU, and the development of a political struggle against the state Labor government

The starting point for a new agreement must be not what the government and union deem "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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