

Vote No to Australian Education Union wage cutting agreement with Victorian Labor government!

The Committee for Public Education (CFPE)
7 February 2022

The Committee for Public Education urges all public school teachers and school workers in Victoria to vote “no” to the proposed industrial agreement announced last Friday by the Australian Education Union (AEU) and the state Labor government.

The proposed agreement is a monstrous sell-out, at the centre of which is a substantial real wage cut.

Teachers are being offered a nominal wage increase of just 1 percent each 6 months, which amounts to less than 2 percent annually, over the next four years. The official inflation rate is 3.5 percent—this, however, underestimates the real cost of living pressures confronting working people. For example, fuel costs are surging at 6.6 percent annually, while the average cost of buying a house rose by 22.4 percent last year. Adding insult to injury, teachers and school workers last year went without any salary rise and the AEU-government proposed agreement only backdates to last month, despite the previous agreement expiring in 2020.

The new agreement, unless it is opposed, will mean that by its expiry in December 2025, educators in Victoria will have a significantly lowered standard of living.

The AEU bureaucracy is attempting to quickly ram through the deal by mid-March under conditions of an unprecedented explosion of COVID-19 infections within the schools.

This timing is not coincidental. The union leadership has been involved in so-called negotiations over the new agreement with government and Department of Education officials for the last 18 months.

On the very same day that teachers began work this term, unnecessarily forced back into classrooms amid a record wave of Omicron infections nationally, the AEU suddenly announced a breakthrough in these talks and unilaterally called off limited work bans that had been in place. Within days of this the deal was unveiled—on Friday afternoon, just after the conclusion of the first week of face to face teaching. Initial tallies across the state over the first five days of term, which are likely a significant underestimate, found 2,900 students and 410 staff infected.

This came after AEU state president Meredith Peace declared that in reopening the schools, the state Labor government of Premier Daniel Andrews was placing “health and safety at the forefront.”

COVID-19 and the AEU

The AEU bureaucracy comprises a privileged upper-middle class layer, and functions as an accomplice of the government and ruling elite. Nowhere is this more clearly demonstrated than in its active support for the school reopening drive.

This is a central part of the political establishment’s push to force the population to “learn to live with the virus.” The end of remote learning has nothing to do with young people’s learning and wellbeing—Prime Minister Scott Morrison has openly acknowledged that the aim is to ensure that workers remain at their workplaces, alleviating labour shortages afflicting sections of business. Teachers, school workers, and their students are being made to endure the threat of entirely preventable infection and illness in order to advance the interests of big business and finance capital.

The last thing the AEU bureaucracy wanted to permit was any escalation of industrial action amid rising anger and opposition over the COVID disaster. In mid-December, the union floated the possibility of a one-day strike and mass meeting for term 1 this year.

Such an action has not been seen since 2013 and is now junked. Officials no doubt feared that a mass meeting would quickly spill out of its control and open up a democratic discussion among teachers on how to take their struggle forward.

The AEU is attempting to separate the industrial agreement from any connection to the COVID-19 disaster—yet the right to a safe workplace is fundamental to any legal document governing conditions in schools. A “no” vote on the AEU-government draft deal must be organised as part of building a unified movement against both the imposition of face to face teaching in unsafe conditions, and the decades-long assault on the public education system.

The draft agreement will do nothing to address the enormous crisis wracking public education. For decades, successive Labor and Liberal governments have funnelled billions of dollars into private schools, including the most lavish and exclusive, while working class public schools lack the resources to deal with the complex learning and social needs of their students. As a consequence, Australia has one of the most extensively privatised education systems in the world, with around 40 percent of students attending private schools.

The AEU has boasted of the “historic” character of their draft agreement—on the basis that it reduces face to face teaching for the first time in more than 30 years.

Several points need to be made in response to this. Firstly, it is an indictment of the union bureaucracy that face to face teaching time has not been reduced for three decades. Australia has one of the most onerous levels of in-class work—for example, upper secondary teachers teach for 821 hours a year, 20 percent higher than the OECD average of 676 hours. This leads to teachers working enormous unpaid overtime, doing planning and assessment on weekends and late into weekday evenings, causing high rates of burnout and young people

quitting the profession.

The draft AEU deal does nothing to resolve this situation. It merely outlines that full time teachers will from 2023 receive an additional hour a week planning time, and another half an hour from 2024. The government has pledged to hire an additional 2,000 teachers as part of this, though it remains unclear whether this will provide sufficient staffing cover.

The union has also boasted of a new proposed annual student free day for teacher assessment and reporting. But this measure, and the additional hour and a half weekly planning time, are being offset by the reduction of “professional practice days” from four to just one over the course of the agreement. These days allow teachers to have their classes covered by a relief teacher while they complete other work or engage in professional development. The slashing of this provision will save the government significant expenditure on relief teachers’ wages.

The union’s other promoted “features” of the draft agreement—improved time in lieu compensation for after-hours school activities such as camps, and for parental leave and superannuation provisions—amount to crudely smeared lipstick on the pig. If rammed through, the deal will worsen teachers’ wages, leave the crisis of the public education system unaddressed, and continue to expose school workers and students to the homicidal “herd immunity” COVID strategy of the state and federal governments.

Opposition immediately erupted with the AEU’s announcement on Friday afternoon. The union then moved to suppress this on their social media outlets—its Facebook post on the deal was put up at 4.20 p.m. and was closed for comments just 40 minutes later.

Several comments were deleted. The most popular that remained were sharply directed against the union. One teacher wrote (with more than 300 “likes”): “Appalling that this is the best the union could wrangle in an election year and with all the goodwill we have earned over the course of the pandemic.” Another (more than 200 “likes”): “This agreement is shameful, I will be cancelling my membership also.”

Teachers on Sunday utilised a fresh AEU post (promoting its delegation at a gay rights rally) to protest the deletion of critical comments on the agreement and the restriction of comments on the post announcing the deal. One wrote: “Stop deleting what your paying members think about a terrible deal that you ‘negotiated’. Union Members vote NO!” Another added: “Members have been sold out here, worst deal in 32 years of my career and it’s not even close. Makes [former Liberal Premier Jeff] Kennett look like Father Christmas. Vote No.”

Build rank and file committees!

This opposition now needs to be organised and politically led. The Committee for Public Education (CFPE) urges the formation of rank and file committees in every school, independently of the AEU. These need to link up, exchange accurate information on the proposed agreement as well as on the situation in the schools including on the COVID-19 crisis. Every effort of the union to stifle and censor discussion must be opposed.

The closest connections must be established with teachers in Australia and around the world who have entered into struggle. In New South Wales, teachers took strike action for the first time in a decade last December and remain without an industrial agreement, while in South Australia, teachers voted by a two-thirds majority to strike on the first day of term before the AEU blocked the action. Internationally, movements of educators include teachers who have

taken strike action across France, those in multiple American cities who organised walkouts and sickouts, and educators in Greece who have occupied dozens of schools to demand safe conditions and proper resources.

The CFPE calls for the convening of a democratically-organised mass meeting of teachers—held online, due to the dangers posed of virus transmission—allowing different perspectives and opinions to be advanced for collective consideration.

The AEU’s ratification mechanism is contemptuous of teachers’ democratic rights and their health and safety. Regionally-based delegates meetings are being convened over three weeks from February 28. Such events have previously limited and dispersed discussion, and have also frequently involved delegates submitting bound votes from their school sub-branches, a process that prevents discussion at these meetings from having any impact on the vote tallies. The union is proceeding with in-person delegates meetings despite the health risks from such events amid the COVID pandemic—raising the question as to whether any discussion at all will proceed outside of individual schools.

The fight against the agreement is above all a political fight. Decent wages and working conditions cannot be secured under conditions of mass COVID-19 infection, nor amid the continued degradation of the public education system. Teachers, education support staff, and students and families must fight to develop the widest movement against the entire political establishment, turn out to other sections of the working class confronting similar attacks and, on this basis, establish the social right for every child to receive the highest quality, freely provided public education and the social right of every educator to receive the proper wages, conditions, and resources to be able to do their job properly.

This program is incompatible with an education system subordinated to the market and the dictates of big business. The entire political establishment, Labor, Liberal, and the other parliamentary parties—serve the interests of the major corporations and the ultra-wealthy. Teachers and other workers need to turn towards a socialist and internationalist perspective that aims to harness the enormous productive capacities and technological resources of the world economy in the interests of the social needs of the vast majority, rather than the narrow interests of the wealthy few.

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