

Australian Education Union promotes misinformation over Victorian teachers' agreement

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The Australian Education Union (AEU) is promoting misinformation on its draft industrial agreement covering tens of thousands of public school teachers and other school workers in the state of Victoria.

Ahead of delegates' meetings that begin next Monday to vote on the proposed agreement, the union bureaucracy has sought to suppress discussion among teachers while at the same time distributing numerous misleading and false statements on the details of the deal it stitched up with the state Labor government.

The AEU's Facebook page continues to feature blanket censorship, with no comments on any posts permitted. This ban was imposed shortly after the draft agreement was announced, and a flood of hostile and angry comments and reactions were registered by teachers and school workers. All but a handful of these comments have since been deleted, with no further reactions permitted.

The AEU held an "information session" on the draft agreement last Tuesday, in which only union officials were allowed to speak. In response to multiple written questions about the Facebook censorship, union state secretary Erin Aulich (annual salary and benefits \$246,000) declared that this was a response to "trolls" violating the union page's protocols. This was an outright lie—numerous school workers captured screen shots before the union deleted comments that were entirely legitimate responses to the draft agreement.

The question can be raised—if the agreement is a "historic" gain, as the union claims, then why the frenzied efforts to suppress discussion?

The union is concerned not only to prevent an informed examination of its sell-out agreement but also to block a discussion in which educators connect the question of their working conditions with the ongoing COVID crisis, against the AEU's insistence that these are entirely separate issues. There is a determined effort on the part of the political and media establishment to "normalise" the return to face-to-face teaching amid widespread community infections.

In just the first two weeks of the school year, Victoria registered infections among 18,825 students and 1,934 teachers.

Children are being infected more than any other group, with 10-19 year-olds the worst affected age bracket and 0-9 year-olds the second worst. Teachers and school workers are being forced to work in unsafe environments. The tragic COVID death on February 16 of a 46-year-old teacher in New South Wales highlighted the dangers.

While suppressing discussion on the draft agreement, the AEU has at the same time flooded union members with material promoting the purported gains won.

The central issue being promoted is the slight reduction in face-to-face teaching time, 1.5 hours per week, which is to be phased in by 2023–24. Weekly teaching time in front of a class is to be reduced from 22.5 to 21 hours for primary teachers and 20 to 18.5 hours for secondary. This measure, however, is elaborated not in the draft agreement but in a connected "deed" document. The union insists this is of no consequence, however one implication is that teaching hours will automatically revert to their previous levels at the end of 2027 unless they are maintained in the subsequent industrial agreement.

The face-to-face teaching reduction is being offset by the phased reduction in "professional practice days," in which a teachers' classes are covered for a day while they do other work such as planning and assessment, from four to one each year.

What is being offered represents a drop in the bucket when placed in the context of the workload crisis that afflicts the public education system. Within the OECD, only six countries have a higher face-to-face teaching load than Australia—Costa Rica, Mexico, Chile, Lithuania, Columbia and New Zealand.

On top of onerous teaching responsibilities are crushing administrative and other duties that force teachers to work enormous unpaid overtime, over the official 38-hour week. According to an AEU survey last year, teachers work an average of 52.8 hours per week, educational support staff (ES) 43.3 hours and principals 58.3 hours. Approximately 60 percent of respondents indicated their workload had increased over the last year.

The draft agreement includes no substantive measures to reduce teachers' administrative workload. Nor does it include

any reduction in class sizes—a critical issue both for teacher workload and student learning and wellbeing. Class sizes are 26 and 25 “on average” for Years F-6 and 7-12 respectively. The crucial word is “on average,” with schools able to routinely breach the formula and have classes in excess of the supposed limit. This formula has remained the same since the union signed off on the 2004 agreement despite continuous and increasingly complex changes to teachers’ responsibilities and workload.

Many issues remain unclear with the proposed agreement, including where the additional staff are going to come from to cover the slightly increased planning and assessment time. The state government has committed to hiring 2,000 additional teachers. There is already a staffing shortfall, however, and whether this eventuates remains to be seen. According to the *Age*, almost one-third of teaching positions are currently unfilled in Melbourne’s northern and western suburbs. These predominantly working-class areas have been the worst hit areas in the latest Omicron surge. Regional areas such as the Mallee, Goulburn and Outer Gippsland also suffer from chronic shortfalls in staffing.

Even with the planned recruitment, 2,000 additional teachers spread across more than 1,500 public schools in Victoria equates to the inadequate average of 1.3 extra educators per school.

The staffing shortage also brings into question another AEU “gain” in the draft agreement, improved time in lieu repayment for school workers after hours’ time spent on responsibilities like school camps. The *Age* reported today that several school principals are preparing to cancel camps and other activities due to a lack of government funding to cover proposed new time in lieu obligations.

Public schools in Victoria are the worst funded of any state in Australia—a situation the AEU’s deal with the state government does nothing to address.

According to a state parliamentary budget costing issued last year, an extra \$1 billion in funding every year over seven years would be required to fund schools in line with the Schooling Resource Standard (SRS). This official index of schools’ funding needs is itself grossly inadequate—a freely accessible public education system offering the highest quality education to every child would likely require tens of billions in additional funding.

The AEU’s proposed agreement will leave the public education system in crisis, while at the same time cutting teachers’ real wages.

This issue has also seen deliberate union misinformation. In an email distributed to union members, the bureaucracy stated that among the “key improvements we have achieved” was a salary rise of “2 percent per year, paid in two instalments—1 percent January and 1 percent July in each year.” As abysmal as a 2 percent nominal wage rise would be, the real figure is in fact less. The mid-year 1 percent increase is only paid for 6

months, so is in effect a 0.5 percent rise, making the overall annual increase just over 1.5 percent.

There are additional minor salary reclassification measures and “position allowances” that will be paid to school workers—but the vast majority of school workers will still be hit by a significant real wage cut.

In recent union meetings promoting the agreement, AEU officials have insisted that while Australia’s inflation rate is 3.5 percent, the rate in Victoria is lower than 3 percent. This represents a desperate effort to conceal the impact of the agreement’s real wage cuts.

The official inflation rate significantly underestimates the actual cost of living rises for working people—for necessities such as housing, fuel, transport, and food, costs have escalated significantly beyond the official inflation rate. Moreover, as the global economic crisis worsens, the inflation rate is set to increase. In the US, Britain, and other countries, prices are rising at twice the current rate in Australia.

The wages component of the proposed agreement forms part of an austerity drive being advanced by the Labor government of Premier Daniel Andrews. Like its state and federal counterparts across Australia, the government is preparing to slash debts incurred during the first two years of the COVID pandemic through cuts to basic social services and infrastructure.

School workers need to take a united stand and vote down the agreement as the first step in developing a counter-offensive for proper salaries and conditions in public schools. The Committee for Public Education urges educators to form rank and file committees in every school and community, uniting school workers with students, families, and the wider working class in a determined fight for a fully funded, freely accessible, and high quality public education system.

The CFPE is holding a public online meeting this Sunday at 4 p.m. to discuss these issues. We encourage people to register in advance here.

Join the Facebook group opposing the deal: “Oppose Australian Education Union 2022 VGSA draft agreement!”

Contact the CFPE:

Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com

Facebook: www.facebook.com/commforpubliceducation

Twitter: [@CFPE_Australia](https://twitter.com/CFPE_Australia)



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