Australian Education Union uses anti-democratic delegates' meetings to promote sellout agreement

Our reporters
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Delegates meetings convened by the Australian Education Union (AEU) are continuing this month across regional and metropolitan Victoria. Through these anti-democratic events, the union bureaucracy is attempting to push through a sellout industrial agreement it negotiated with the state Labor government.

The fight for a "No" vote is being led by the Committee for Public Education (CFPE), which is the only political tendency to have issued statements and organised public meetings on the draft agreement. The CFPE also established a Facebook group to coordinate and discuss opposition to the deal, with more than 400 teachers and school workers now involved. Teachers have reported to the page majority "No" votes on the agreement from dozens of schools. CFPE campaigners have also spoken with teachers and school staff at different delegates meetings held in Melbourne, as well as in the regional city of Shepparton.

The first delegates meeting, held last Monday at the AEU central office in the inner Melbourne suburb of Abbotsford, provided a sharp demonstration of the escalating disaffection and hostility felt by many teachers toward the union. Only about 30 school staff participated in the meeting, far lower than at similar meetings held to ratify previous agreements. Attendance in previous years was with packed, standing room-only meetings. Last Monday, however, only a small minority of the chairs were occupied.

Concerns over COVID-19 infection were likely one factor. The AEU organised the meeting in line with its lockstep support for the federal and state government's normalisation of daily mass infection, which includes its collaboration with the reopening of the schools earlier this year. The indoor meeting involved few mitigation measures, with multiple union officials appearing without masks.

The low attendance was not solely, or even primarily, due to COVID. There is widespread disgust with the union over the draft agreement, which follows two decades of similar betrayals of teachers' and school workers' wages and conditions (see: "Australian Education Union's record of agreement sell-outs"). When the deal was unveiled, numerous teachers used social media to denounce the bureaucracy and explain that they were quitting the AEU. Many experienced teachers know from bitter experience that democratic discussion within the parameters set by the union is impossible.

The union bureaucracy designed the delegates meetings to suppress and isolate opposition. A mass meeting of teachers and school workers has not been organised in Victoria since 2013. This year an online mass meeting could have easily been organised, allowing teachers to safely participate in a debate and learn about different perspectives on the proposed agreement.

Instead of this, 29 delegates meetings are being convened across the state, concluding on March 17. These are dominated by the bureaucracy, with union officials consuming the vast majority of the available time.

At the Abbotsford delegates meeting, AEU state deputy president Justin Mullaly (annual salary and benefits $234,000) gave the opening report promoting the agreement, speaking for about 20 minutes. He then spent about the same amount of time answering questions, then spoke again when formally moving the motion to endorse the deal, and then yet again at the end of the meeting when he was given the "right of reply" following the limited discussion that proceeded.

The CFPE and *World Socialist Web Site* have previously exposed the draft agreement and the AEU misinformation that has accompanied it.

Mullaly insisted that while "no agreement is perfect," the union's deal with the government was "comprehensive" and provided a "great opportunity to recruit" new members of the AEU. He declared that a 1.5-hour reduction in face-to-face teaching per week, to be phased in over the next two years, was "enough reason to vote yes," despite the teaching workload remaining among the world's highest and with nothing substantial done to reduce teachers' administrative

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duties.

Mullaly desperately attempted to defend the salaries component of the agreement, which involves a significant real wage cut. Baseline wages are to increase by just 1 percent every 6 months over the course of the four-year agreement. This is less than 2 percent annually because the first 1 percent is paid for just 6 months, so effectively equates to a 0.5 percent increase. This follows an effective wage freeze last year after the expiration of the previous agreement.

Different bonus allowances and salary level reclassifications will slightly increase pay levels. Mullaly insisted that over the four years, teachers' would see a 9.31 percent salary increase and another 4 percent in allowances, but this remains below the increasing costs of living.

The union is attempting to deny that it is responsible for a real wage cut, on the basis that Melbourne's official inflation rate (2.5 percent) is lower than the national rate (3.5 percent). Mullaly added that the state's treasury department is forecasting 2 percent inflation in Victoria next year. This is all blatant misinformation. Melbourne's lower than average inflation rate largely reflects a decline in house prices that will almost certainly prove temporary. The financial press is full of commentary about the coming wave of inflationary pressures, far above the treasury's low estimate.

Moreover, the official inflation calculations severely underestimate the real impact on the working class of rising costs in "non-discretionary" items—fuel, food, housing, and other essentials. There is no question that if the agreement is pushed through, teachers will be worse off.

Members of the CFPE spoke in opposition to the agreement during the short discussion period of the Abbotsford meeting.

Veteran high school teacher Will Marshall exposed the union's claims on workload, wages, and provisions covering Education Support staff. He condemned the union's censorship of discussion on its Facebook page, which has seen numerous comments opposing the draft agreement deleted and further commenting blocked by the site's administrators. Marshall also connected the sell-out agreement with the union's support for the reopening of the schools amid widespread community transmission of COVID-19.

"How can we trust the AEU, which has been happy to go along with the state government and send us into schools where we know that COVID is present?" he asked. "In just the first two weeks of the start of school in Victoria, more than 18,000 students tested positive, and 1,900 staff did also. Tragically, two weeks ago a teacher died from COVID in New South Wales. It is clear that the government and the union don't care how many of us are infected and placed at risk."

Reflecting the sensitivity of the AEU to any criticism of its role within the ongoing pandemic, the meeting chair, union state president Meredith Peace, interjected to try to prevent Marshall speaking on COVID, insisting he had to "speak to the motion," i.e., support or oppose the agreement.

The CFPE encourages teachers attending the delegates meetings to contact us, and to send reports from your area.

As we raised in our February 7 statement: "Opposition now needs to be organised and politically led. The Committee for Public Education 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…

"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."

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