

Australian Education Union sell-out agreement met with record opposition—Vote “No” in employee ballot!

Committee for Public Education
22 March 2022

The Australian Education Union in Victoria announced Monday that its draft industrial agreement with the state Labor government had been opposed by 39.3 percent of those voting through delegates' meetings. This represents record-high opposition registered against the AEU's four-year industrial agreements.

For the last regressive agreement in 2017, 18 percent of delegates voted “no,” less than half the current outcome. Of this year's delegates' votes—allocated to schools on the basis of one per 20 union members—1,272 were in favour and 823 against. The “no” vote was higher in Melbourne than in rural and regional areas, and higher again in the city's more working class areas.

The AEU is attempting to present the agreement as now in effect. Under the national industrial relations regime, however, an agreement must receive a majority vote in a separate, yet to be held, ballot of every individual covered by it, both union and non-union members. Teachers and school workers ought to vote “no,” with the fight for the rejection of the agreement the first step in the development of a unified counter-offensive for decent wages and conditions and for a properly-resourced public education system.

The opposition registered through the 29 delegates' meetings in the past three weeks reflects the depth of hostility toward the sell-out deal from overloaded and underpaid educators and school staff in the crisis-stricken public education system under conditions of COVID surging through schools. Significantly, it demonstrates opposition to both the AEU and the state Labor government of Premier Daniel Andrews.

At the centre of the proposed agreement is a substantial real wage cut. Teachers and school staff have already had a 12-month wage freeze last year, as a result of the expiration of the previous agreement in 2020 and the failure to backdate the current proposed agreement before January. For the next four years, the AEU and the state Labor government are attempting to impose nominal wage rises of just 1 percent every six months, with the first of these each year applying to six months' work, so in effect a 0.5 percent plus 1 percent increase annually.

There are some minor additional payments through annual “bonus” pay that does not accumulate with teachers' base salaries, and salary increment changes. These do not change the fact, however, that the agreement cuts real wages. Costs of living are currently surging, with rising international oil prices flowing through to transport, power, food, and other basic necessities. Housing costs have been rising in the double-digit percentages annually over the last several years.

For many educators, the prospect of a real wage cut was the straw that broke the camel's back. It came after two years of challenging pandemic working conditions, including hastily demanded and inadequately supported remote learning, followed by the premature and AEU-enforced reckless and dangerous reopening of the schools amid COVID-19 community transmission. This led to thousands of educators and students being infected with COVID-19, with 18,825 students and 1,934 educators infected in the first two weeks of this term.

The public education system was already in crisis before the pandemic hit, with schools, especially those in working-class communities, deprived of the necessary resources and staffing, while successive Labor and Liberal governments funnelled vast public monies into private schools.

The AEU was only able to secure its 59.7 percent majority in the delegate vote through a calculated disinformation campaign.

After blocking industrial action and refusing to hold a mass meeting during the negotiations with the state Labor government, the union bureaucracy declared on February 4 it had won a “historic agreement,” on the basis that face-to-face teaching hours would be reduced by 1.5 hours a week over the course of the agreement. The AEU appeared to have anticipated accolades for this. In fact the measure received short shrift from teachers. Various concessions were agreed to by the union to offset state government costs, including a phased reduction of “professional practice days,” i.e. time allocated to teachers to focus on non-teaching work, from four days a year to just one.

Nothing whatever was done to reduce the enormous administrative and standardised testing related workload that

has caused escalating unpaid overtime and widespread workplace stress and burnout.

The AEU bureaucracy mobilised the union's resources to ram the agreement through. This included glossy "vote yes" posters sent to schools, and editorials written in favour in union publications mailed to the AEU membership, with no space provided to opponents of the deal. The union quickly deleted and blocked comments on its Facebook page in an effort to prevent any discussion between teachers and school workers.

In an "information session" held before the delegates' meetings—in which no-one other than AEU officials were permitted to speak, union state secretary Erin Aulich (annual salary and benefits \$246,000) lyingly insisted that the social media censorship was aimed at blocking "trolls" violating the union page's protocols. Similar misinformation and censorship dominated the delegates' meetings themselves. Union officials dominated the discussion from beginning to end, with individual opponents of the agreement permitted just three minutes to speak.

The close outcome of the delegates' vote has clearly alarmed the AEU bureaucracy. Union state president Meredith Peace (annual salary and benefits \$244,000), sent a lengthy email to AEU members on Monday on the outcome. She declared in bold print: "Now that union members have endorsed the in-principle agreement, every member must support the majority position taken by members and vote YES for the agreement in the ballot of all employees."

This is false—no teacher and school worker "must" vote yes. Everyone covered by the proposed agreement, union and non-union, has the opportunity and responsibility to consider the situation and make up their own mind.

The AEU is facing increasing membership resignations, with teachers' letters describing the behaviour of union officials as "undemocratic, "bullyish" and using "outrageous strong arm tactics." In response, the AEU has contacted school branches offering to participate in branch meetings. Desperate to halt the opposition, and fearing a "no" vote from other staff employees, the union bureaucrats have suggested that delegates call meetings inviting non-members, with the aim of explaining why they should vote "yes" and of signing up new members.

Pseudo-left organisations have lined up behind the AEU, refusing to advocate a "no" vote on the upcoming state-wide ballot on the basis that "union democracy" must be respected. This reflects the pseudo-lefts' lockstep complicity with the AEU bureaucracy. As far as "union democracy" goes—which does not exist cannot be respected. The AEU has flouted basic democratic norms in its fight for a wage-cutting agreement, and educators and school workers have every right to strike down the deal.

In fighting for a rejection of the proposed agreement, teachers and school workers need to strike out on a new road. Every effort to pressure the AEU bureaucracy has repeatedly proven an abject failure—what is required is a new political perspective.

This has been advanced only by the Committee for Public Education, which has led the fight for a "no" vote.

As we raised in our February 7 statement: "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."

The statement continued: "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."

We urge all educators and school workers to fight for the broadest "no" vote on the state-wide ballot, and to contact the CFPE to take forward the necessary political fight.

Contact the CFPE today:

Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com

Facebook: www.facebook.com/groups/678929646894212

www.facebook.com/commforpubliceducation

Twitter: @CFPE_Australia



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact