

Teachers speak out against Australian Education Union-Victorian Labor government agreement

Our reporters
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This week educators in New South Wales and Victoria, the two most populous states, returned to school after the holiday break. Term two begins amid a deepening crisis in public education with growing educator unrest, the outcome of an escalating staffing crisis, intolerable working conditions, inadequate wages and the spread of COVID throughout schools.

On Tuesday, the New South Wales Teachers Federation (NSWTF) announced a state-wide strike of educators on May 4 over the lack of an industrial agreement on wages and conditions. This follows a stoppage last December, the first in a decade.

In Victoria, nearly 40 percent of union delegates voted “no” to the latest industrial agreement of the Australian Education Union (AEU) and the state Labor government. The deal amounts to a wage cut and provides only a pittance to address unsustainable workloads that are driving education workers out of the profession in droves.

The narrow majority “yes” vote was rammed through by the union via a campaign of misinformation, anti-democratic and bureaucratically staged delegates meetings, the suppression of opposition and removal of critical comments on the union Facebook page.

The disaffection expressed in the vote alarmed the bureaucrats with Victorian AEU president Meredith Peace declaring in an email that all members were obliged to vote “yes” in the next stage of the ballot.

Enraged by the sell-out deal and union “strong-arm tactics,” teachers took to social media contacting the Committee for Public Education (CFPE) and describing the union bullying campaign as the “straw that broke the camel’s back.” Many stated they were resigning from the union but would continue to campaign for a “no” vote.

Throughout, the CFPE has politically led the campaign for a “no” vote, fighting for the formation of independent rank-and-file committees and explaining that “the fight for decent wages, workloads and properly funded public education means a determined political and industrial fight against the Andrews government” (see: “Vote ‘no’ to the teachers’ sell-out agreement in Victoria! Prepare for a political struggle against state Labor government!”)

The CFPE urges teachers and school workers to vote “no” in the next stage of the ballot, which involves all school staff whether members of the union or otherwise.

Below are comments made by several teachers and school staff to the CFPE.

A Melbourne secondary teacher:

When the deal came out the union closed commenting on their Facebook page and removed posts. Absolutely vile. How can anyone support a union that removes criticism?

The lack of ability to criticise tells us everything. The union wants it to look like all people are in favour. But the AEU and a Victorian teachers

Facebook group which was set up for online purposes are both censoring. It’s not okay. We need to be able to discuss this.

I emailed the union my resignation. I said I would call them but I’m too exhausted. If the union had have allowed us to follow through with our vote for industrial action, we would probably be out on strike with NSW teachers next week.

I was employed to do one job in a secondary school but because of staff shortages I am allocated to do other teaching. This is the same for many of my colleagues. I’m exhausted and I think it is going to be a long year. Teachers like myself are going to leave at the end of the year because we are being asked to work a job that is unmanageable and unhealthy and it will not change.

Our health and happiness mean more and we are just cogs in a broken system. And unless things change, teacher shortages and staffing will remain a consistent problem this year, and in the years to come.

I follow a UK teachers’ group and many are quitting to do something else. The stories they have. Head teachers have power. Teachers end up being observed and put on support plans, or have severe issues with staff and bullying. Teachers are being pushed out, insulted and just generally going on sick leave because of conditions. It’s eye-opening reading, but dissatisfaction among educators is global and needs addressing.

A primary teacher from Melbourne:

The issue of workload has not been addressed. I start at 7.30 a.m. and work through to 5 p.m. each day. There is no time allocated for critical tasks to be completed. One hour per week extra planning is rubbish. It is also quite disrespectful to say we are receiving a 2 percent wage increase, especially under conditions of growing inflation.

We need to drop all administration tasks—employ an administrator to do these tasks. Time to correct work and plan lessons is paramount.

It has been a kick in the guts for educators who continue to put in the time. With the allocation of large amounts to private schools, we scramble to access resources or be remunerated for the purchase of materials to teach with.

The availability of resources is down to teacher provision or parent input. I teach in an area of generational poverty. Kids are at a low academic level. They need great amounts of support. At the point where more is expected of teachers, there is never enough to deal with all issues within the school.

There is no money for state education and I get frustrated as private schools get extra; resources, land, assets, etc. The difference between the haves and the have nots is increasing.

The fact that we can’t get CRTs [Casual Relief Teachers] during the COVID crisis, highlights the deficiencies of staffing levels—classes have been combined and we are regarded as “combined class babysitters.” There is talk about new strains and that we have to use sick leave if we get

it. This is unfair as the Education Department is placing me in this environment.

I am not keen for either Labor or the Liberals. Can't vote for either of these two parties. I have produced the flyers from the CFPE and distributed them. I would be surprised if many vote "yes."

A primary teacher in regional Victoria:

Before the union developed the log of claims I was geared towards improvements in workload. Pay wasn't the number one thing. I hoped workload would be addressed and during report writing time for instance I wouldn't be lugging all my work home taking out my laptop as soon as the kids go to bed. Further, I thought if workload was addressed it would allow me time to prepare, with no rush and to teach better.

If I could only do 38 hours each week and not take so much work home, it would be very different. The government is presently putting out colourful advertisements to attract new teachers but they are hardly appealing. People are leaving teaching. I know I can't keep doing all this.

I'm not political. I'm generally a Labor voter and I'm surprised that this issue with the agreement is happening with Labor, you'd expect this from a Liberal government.

The agreement between the Baillieu Liberal government and the union in 2013 was the first time that I saw the AEU accepting a deal that was so far from its original log of claims. It seemed bizarre they accepted it.

If the deal is rejected it is real egg on the union's face. It will look poor if the AEU and the government have agreed to it. Everyone knows the union has closed down Facebook page comments. I agree about rank-and-file committees but we need a school to start it and then publicise it widely, get the message out.

The situation with COVID is a real mess and not looking good for term two with no masks. Teachers are at breaking point, with teacher shortages. I will be wearing a mask at school. I'm not fussed that I might be among the 4 percent of teachers wearing them. I have been fortunate to avoid COVID so far, and I don't want to bring it back to my family.

When the government previously released their COVID updates it used to be a daily outrage of 14 people dead, 16, 18 everyday—but now there is no fuss made. The whole narrative has shifted. It is interesting we were previously asked to wear masks and then that was dropped when things are worse.

Sally McManus, the head of the unions, previously made comments that people should not be going to work if unsafe and Meredith Peace made similar comments—all sorts of generic statements but before you know it the term starts and we are back at school.

An educator from South Australia:

What is happening with the Victorian agreement, happened here in South Australia (SA) with our last agreement. The state AEU treated members in a very similar way. I resigned my membership of the union after decades of faithful support and allegiance, and a strong family history of active unionism. I could no longer support a union that worked so hard against the best interests of their members. AEUSA has been hemorrhaging members in the words of one of their organisers. It was a sad day for me but I have found new solidarity in the CFPE.

NSW teachers have now confirmed that they will be going on strike next week for better pay and conditions. Why is the NSW Teachers Federation saying 2.5 percent isn't enough but the Victorian AEU says it's a good deal?

There needs to be solidarity between states. Educators need to stick together. Last December when NSW teachers were going on strike I wrote to the AEUSA and asked if the union in SA was going to do anything to support NSW teachers? Their reply was NSWTF had not asked for support so they would do nothing!

If the unions won't do it for us, fight for solidarity, then we need to do it ourselves. As the CFPE says, form rank-and-file committees and vote "no" to the Victorian agreement!

A secondary teacher from Melbourne:

The last email from the union was just a propaganda sheet to say why teachers needed to vote "yes." A lot of teachers were very upset about the email from Meredith Peace demanding we all must vote "yes." I'm the union rep and as soon as the delegates vote was announced I sent a staff email to all teachers whether union or non-union that the next stage is where everyone gets a vote.

I went through some reasons why they should vote "no," to weigh up the merits of the agreement or otherwise. I brought back conversations from the CFPE Facebook page.

Our branch had 3 votes at the delegates meeting and all 3 voted "no." We were the same at the last agreement in 2017, 90 percent of members voted no. Your articles going back through the union agreements were important.

Education is about the kids. The 2-tier system of public and private is just getting worse. The budget made cuts to public schools and gave millions to private schools. I hope Morrison does not get re-elected. I am not sure why the state Labor sold us this deal, shouldn't the unions go in and fight harder?

With COVID, the union has done nothing to assist us, they stepped back and let it take its course. I have a VCE [final year] class and the school doesn't cover their classes when teachers are absent. My daughter got COVID so I had to isolate. I left work for my classes but none of my classes were covered. I now have to get students up to speed.

Before the delegates vote we were contacted by the union to meet with teachers and others to discuss the agreement. I sent back and said "we have already voted 'no' but you are welcome to come and discuss as our members are upset about the agreement." She did not even answer my email.

The union's claim of employing another 2,000 teachers is just fairy tale stuff. It is just not going to happen. We can't even get CRTs, we have used most of our budget and we are in borderline crisis. Staff at the school are exhausted and disgruntled. We need to spread the word to vote "no."

Contact the CFPE:

Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com

Facebook:

facebook.com/commforpubliceducation

facebook.com/groups/opposeaeusellout/

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