

Victorian teachers to vote on Australian Education Union sell-out industrial agreement

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13 May 2022

Public school teachers and workers in Victoria begin voting Monday on a sell out industrial agreement negotiated by the Australian Education Union (AEU) and the state Labor government of Premier Daniel Andrews.

The deal only narrowly passed a vote through union delegates' meetings held in March, with a record 40 percent "no" vote. The final vote to ratify the draft agreement, required under Australian industrial relations law, involves everyone covered by it, union and non-union members within the schools. Ballots will be collected next week, concluding on Friday.

The Committee for Public Education, which has politically led the fight against the AEU's betrayal, has called on all teachers and Education Support staff to vote "no" in the ballot.

This, however, is only a starting point. Whatever the result, the AEU bureaucracy will seek to push through a sell-out agreement, in line with its role as an industrial police force of the state Labor government.

The crucial issue is for teachers to take matters into their own hands through the formation of rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions, at all schools. Such committees are the only means of breaking the isolation of the AEU, uniting all education staff and preparing a genuine industrial and political fight against the agreement and the Labor government.

Teachers should turn out to other sections of workers, who face surging inflation, job cuts and increasingly intolerable conditions. Above all, the unending attacks on education and healthcare, raises the need for a socialist perspective, which rejects the subordination of every aspect of society to the profit interests of the major banks and corporations.

The AEU bureaucracy is clearly concerned about the threat that its deal with the state government will be voted down. From the very announcement of the agreement on March 21, the union orchestrated a concerted campaign to

ram it through. This included systematic misinformation concerning the contents of the draft agreement, a propaganda barrage demanding a "yes" vote that flooded the schools, and the censorship of all opposition on the union's social media outlets.

As soon as the delegates vote was announced, union president Meredith Peace wrote a letter to all members anti-democratically declaring that "every member must support the majority position taken by members and vote YES for the agreement in the ballot of all employees."

The AEU organised a webinar meeting last Wednesday for AEU teacher representatives in the schools, to explain their role in the voting process and to provide "support for conversations with staff."

The presentation involved explaining and answering questions on the ballot process, including hosing down the enormous anger and opposition from ordinary teachers and Education Support (ES) staff. One teacher who attended told the *World Socialist Web Site* that around 100 people attended; some of them supporters of the AEU leadership who expressed alarm over how they could "sell" the agreement to their colleagues ahead of the ballot.

AEU president Meredith Peace again desperately attempted to deny that the deal involved a real wage cut for teachers.

If the agreement is ratified, base salaries will increase by just 1 percent every 6 months over the course of the four-year agreement (this is less than 2 percent as the first 1 percent rise applies only to 6 months, so in effect is a 0.5 percent increase). This follows the wage freeze imposed by the union and state government for 2021.

The state Labor government is seeking to impose real wage cuts on teachers and other public sector workers as part of its drive to reduce Victoria's state debt and deficits, which are the highest in the country, on behalf of big business and finance capital.

The AEU boasts that other measures including a 1 percent annual bonus allowance and salary structure reclassification measures provide additional wage rises. These, however, do not apply to all school workers. They do not count towards base salary and therefore do not accumulate over time.

AEU state deputy president Justin Mullaly has previously claimed that over the next four years, teachers would see a total 9.31 percent salary increase and another 4 percent in allowances. Even if this is taken as good coin, if divided over the five years of the 2021 wage freeze and subsequent period of the agreement, it amounts to 2.7 percent annually.

The official inflation rate is running at nearly double that, 5.1 percent.

At Wednesday's AEU meeting, Peace attempted to downplay the cost of living crisis affecting the working class. This included an absurd attempt to challenge the official inflation index: "You cannot measure CPI [consumer price index] till time has lapsed because it is a cost-of-living measure, about what it costs you to live. It includes a whole basket of goods—some of those you may or may not use in your lifestyle or in your life—like childcare for example, but there is a basket of goods included in that. The CPI measure that has just come out is for the 12 months that has just gone. So the most recent figures that have come out are for March 2021 to March 2022, so they are for the past, not now or the future. We don't know what CPI is and I hope it is not as high as it currently is."

The CPI measure of inflation in fact understates the impact of rising costs of living for working people. The price of non-discretionary goods, that is those essential for daily life, are rising at 6.6 percent annually. Some areas are even higher, for example, in the last 12 months, housing costs have risen 6.7 percent and transport 13.7 percent.

Contrary to Peace's stated "hope" that inflation will come down, the situation is only going to deteriorate further as the global capitalist crisis worsens. The supply chain issues triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic are being exacerbated by the US-NATO proxy war against Russia in Ukraine. Inflation is skyrocketing in the US and Britain, approaching 10 percent in both countries, as well as in former colonial countries like Sri Lanka and Peru.

The AEU-Labor government deal will, if ratified, significantly worsen teachers' and school workers' living standards, while also exacerbating the crisis within the public education system and doing nothing to resolve the

abysmal working conditions confronted by educators.

A phased introduction of an additional 1.5 hour reduction in weekly face to face teaching time will still leave public school teachers with one of the highest workloads among OECD countries. This measure is also offset by various concessions, including the 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 is proposed to reduce the enormous administrative and standardised testing related workload that has caused escalating unpaid overtime and widespread workplace stress and burnout. The COVID-19 disaster that has seen Australia register one of the highest infection rates in the world, and over 7,000 deaths, will continue to rip through the schools unchecked.

Sue Phillips, national convenor of the Committee For Public Education, told the WSWs: "Every educator should fight for the highest possible 'no' vote in the general ballot. Reject the censorship, scare mongering, and misinformation by the union! Throw out the sell out deal between the AEU and the Labor government, and form rank-and file-committees independent of the union. This is the necessary next step in the fight to develop a unified movement of educators throughout Australia, linking up with other sections of the working class confronting similar attacks, in defence of decent wages and working conditions, and for a fully funded, universally accessible public education system."

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