

Teacher denounces Australian Education Union censorship over new agreement

Sue Phillips
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This week all school employees in Victorian public schools, union and non-union members alike, are voting on a four-year agreement between the Australian Education Union (AEU) and the state Labor government on wages and working conditions.

The sell-out deal is an effective wage cut and offers little to address appalling workloads. In an unprecedented high “no” vote, nearly 40 percent of union delegates rejected the agreement.

In February, the Committee for Public Education (CFPE), in response to union misinformation, established a Facebook page to oppose the deal. The page, which now has 700 members, provides a platform for information sharing and democratic discussion and a political program to defend teachers’ wages and conditions.

With opposition growing and expressed in union resignations, the AEU has resorted to what some educators have described as “coercion” and “scare-mongering” by claiming a “no vote” will put so-called gains at risk and insisting teachers have no choice but to vote “yes.”

The final vote will be tallied by the Department of Education, the employer, without independent oversight, another expression of the anti-democratic process.

CFPE national convenor Sue Phillips recently spoke with a Melbourne secondary teacher with more than 10 years teaching experience. She has requested that the comments remain anonymous.

What did you think when the union signed the sell-out agreement?

Industrial action was on the table last December but then shelved by the union. Many teachers were disappointed. It’s not that everyone was expecting a whole lot from the agreement, but jeez, it was a real slap in the face after two years of hell. It felt like no one who makes decisions is really listening to what is happening in education.

When AEU officials were questioned about censorship, they claimed trolls and outsiders were disrupting the Facebook page?

This is ridiculous. I have previously worked outside

teaching in online businesses, responsible for social media and moderation, global corporations.

The union is raising that a “majority” of delegates have supported the agreement in their propaganda but a 40 percent “no vote” is substantial.

A lot of teachers who don’t have time may think that the “majority” of teachers want this so they should vote “yes,” but people don’t understand how small the majority is.

If people post comments in favour of the union and the agreement, the posts stay. But the minute you say this is a bad deal or the union is crap, anything negative, it gets shut down. This happens on other online forums, even in NSW forums. Anytime you criticise, they remove it.

The AEU’s aim is to look like there is no other side. However there is simmering opposition and anger from teachers with many leaving the union. I would like to know how many have resigned, that number should tell people a lot.

What did you think when union state president Meredith Peace demanded in emails that AEU members must vote “yes”?

Earlier some of us thought the union was on our side. After the agreement was announced I heard from school staff. Everyone thought the agreement was a joke.

A “yes” might have been alright in December when there was no deal and a suggestion we might take strike action, but fast forward, life now is so different.

NSW teachers are striking for more and the union is demanding we sign this agreement that takes us way behind other states. This is not just a one-year agreement, it is for four years, under conditions of extreme teacher burn out.

The AEU needs to be helping. I think in most schools they’re trying to say business as usual. It’s like COVID never happened.

The education department is trying to ignore teachers, pretending we are not traumatised and we are meant to be happy for the kids. Yes, we can be happy for the kids but what are the department and the AEU doing for us? The AEU needs to be in our corner, teachers feel alone.

Why do you think the AEU signed this agreement?

My understanding of unions was that they were not supposed to be in cahoots with the government. They're supposed to represent us and be in our corner and fight for our rights, but I feel the lines have been crossed.

With Education Staff, teachers and principals disagreeing with what their union is telling us, I feel like a "no vote" is brewing. But it depends on all staff understanding what is in the agreement and not everyone does.

When I have conversations, I try and tell everyone that this is a bad deal. One of my online comments about teachers leaving and the conditions in the schools received 500 likes.

Why are teachers striking in NSW and we are not? Why is the union here only giving us the potential of one hour less face to face? Why doesn't our back pay extend to the last agreement? Who signed that? Who said that was a good idea? No back pay and a pay rise of 1 percent every six months. It is lunacy.

We are working through unprecedented stuff. COVID and remote learning have caused a lot of retirements and lots of people changing careers. It's chaos, like a war zone, and teachers are dropping like flies. I'm worried about the future of teaching and society. If we don't have teachers, how are we going to educate kids.

Can you explain the conditions in schools?

There's a staffing crisis. In the federal election, Labor is saying they are going to throw some money at getting new teachers but unless you address teacher well-being now, people are going to leave. Teachers are leaving who have more than 10 years' experience and who have a lot to share and assist with graduates. We need a safe working environment, where our health and conditions are at the forefront.

I am watching the faces of the pre-service teachers here and they are scared. This is not what we signed up for, the workplace has a bad feel. Some newish graduates, who have taken on new roles, are taking days off to keep up with their work. Some of them are not handling things. Workload is a mess.

We need to do our job without these stress levels. I can't even explain what it was like in term one. When it ended it was like term four, end of the year. We were mentally and physically exhausted.

Kids have all sorts of issues, some did before but now with COVID they all have issues, they are all affected.

What do you think about the fact that this deal is from a Labor government?

At first, I was in agreement with the Andrews [state Labor] government with COVID. Then, when everything ballooned in January we were going back to school when everyone had COVID, I was thinking why are going back? It was

unbelievable how much Andrews changed, from Labor seemingly being on the side of teachers at one point, and then to shift against us with Labor and Scott Morrison saying that schools needed to be open.

If teachers are so important in society and schools are to be opened, why hasn't the agreement reflected that? Why only a 1 percent rise every 6 months. I am not disregarding nurses and workers in other industries, but if we are so important to keep society open, then why are we being disregarded?

What do you think about the CFPE's call for rank-and-file committees independent of the unions?

It will be interesting to see what happens with the vote and whether the union has any support. The government will look at the vote and I think it will scare them a little.

There is now more opportunity for others to take charge. Teachers have never been more in a position of power. If teachers are leaving and no one can replace them, we have power.

If we don't agree with the union and don't have trust in them, we need other options that are actually independent and do what we need.

The distrust of the union is high. We cannot have them fighting for us. Some people have said I'm scared if we send them back to re-negotiate, they are incompetent. We need a vote of no confidence. If there are re-negotiations, negotiators must be strong, we must have faith in them.

We have never seen so much teacher energy for a "no vote" and teacher dissatisfaction. The Facebook page you have established has been important, it's the only forum to share uncensored thoughts. It shows how much anger there is out there about what's happening.

Contact the CFPE:

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