

Australian Education Union rams through deal to slash Victorian teachers' pay and conditions

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In the face of widespread opposition, the Australian Education Union (AEU) has rammed through an enterprise agreement it hatched with the Victorian state Labor Party government, imposing real pay cuts on tens of thousands of educators and entrenching their intolerable working conditions.

The imposition of the deal vindicates the warnings of the Committee for Public Education (CFPE), a rank-and-file teachers, parents and students group that politically led opposition to the sell-out.

The AEU does not represent teachers in any way. It is an anti-democratic, bureaucratic apparatus that seeks to enforce the dictates of governments and big business, against the educators it falsely claims to represent.

The new agreement will not only worsen the wages and conditions of teachers. It represents a deepening of the decades-long assault on public education, which will impact the entire working class; and it establishes a new precedent for attacks on teachers in other states and for all public sector employees.

It is a sharp warning of the assault to come under the new federal Labor government, which will likewise work hand-in-glove with all the trade unions, and their big business partners, to suppress workers' opposition as they impose further real wage cuts and evisceration of conditions.

An AEU bulletin announced on Thursday that the deal had been ratified in a ballot conducted over the previous weeks.

Far from being a glowing endorsement of the agreement, the vote revealed mass hostility to the betrayal. Just 61.8 percent of teachers and staff who voted cast a ballot in favor of the agreement, with 38.2 percent registering their opposition. The one third "no" vote is the largest against a Victorian AEU agreement in history,

comparing, for instance, with an 18 percent "no" vote on the last deal in 2017.

The result is similar to the outcome of a delegates' ballot on the same agreement last March, which saw a "no" vote higher than 39 percent.

The most striking aspect of the final ballot, is that in the face of a barrage of misinformation and censorship from the AEU leadership, well over 20,000 teachers, education staff and principals saw through the union's lies and sought to block the sell-out.

The agreement mandates an annual wage increase of just 1.5 percent. That is under conditions where official inflation has now reached 5.1 percent, and the cost of living is rising far more rapidly. Petrol prices have soared, many foodstuffs have doubled in cost and electricity prices are set to go up by 18 percent or more over the coming months.

In other words, the AEU deal locks in a "wage increase" that is already a pay cut against inflation, which is set to worsen over the four years of the agreement.

The deal also enshrines the intolerable conditions, which are themselves the product of previous AEU betrayals, as well as funding cuts to public education, imposed by governments that the union collaborated with.

Under conditions where teachers are putting in hours of unpaid overtime a week, due to soaring workloads, the agreement provides for only a 1.5 hour per week reduction in face-to-face teaching time. This, however, will not be fully implemented until 2024. And it is offset by a phased elimination of "professional practice days," i.e. time allocated to teachers to focus on non-teaching work.

Not a single clause of the deal will address rising class sizes or inadequate classroom resourcing, while the unbearable workloads that it entrenches will continue to

drive thousands of teachers out of the profession, further exacerbating a staffing crisis.

The agreement does not even mention COVID, under conditions in which thousands of students and educators have been infected this year. As it was finalising the draft agreement, the AEU enforced the Labor government's mass return to in-person teaching, transforming schools into daily super-spreaders. The policy, demanded by the financial elite, was aimed solely at ensuring that parents could attend their workplaces to guarantee maximum corporate profit-making.

When the draft agreement was announced in early February, it provoked an outpouring of anger. The AEU responded by removing all critical comments from its Facebook page, a practice it has maintained over the ensuing four months.

In the weeks before the ballot, the AEU took its misinformation campaign to a new level. AEU Victorian president Meredith Peace ludicrously claimed that current and future inflation may be less than the 5.1 percent figure registered over the past year. She provided no evidence because there is none—all the indices and predictions in Australia and internationally are to the contrary.

Peace also sent an email to all union members, declaring that they “must” vote “yes” in the general ballot, because the agreement had been narrowly ratified in the delegates’ vote. The statement recalls the concept of a “democratic” ballot advanced by dictators and autocrats.

Thursday’s announcement that the agreement passed has been met with considerable opposition, including scepticism regarding the bonafides of the vote. Increasing numbers of teachers have joined the CFPE Facebook page opposing the deal since the vote was announced, with dozens stating that they are quitting the union.

The response demonstrates that the opposition reflected in the ballot will not go away. As the cost-of-living crisis intensifies and the agreement is implemented, the hostility will mount, along with a broader movement of the working class that is building up among educators, healthcare staff, logistics employees and other sections.

The critical question is how this struggle can be taken forward. As the CFPE explained, a “no” vote was only the first step. Even if the general ballot had registered a majority “no” vote, the AEU would have called further ballots and used other anti-democratic measures to try and impose the agreement.

What is required is a political fight against the state Labor government and the AEU, which are seeking to make educators and the working class pay for the budget

deficit racked up by major handouts to big business during the pandemic. The same class war agenda is being implemented in every other state.

At the federal level, the new Labor government, which the AEU has supported, has already announced plans to carry out “budget repair,” which will require that working people make “sacrifices.”

Not a single step forward can be taken within the straitjacket of the AEU. New organisations of struggle, rank-and-file committees independent of the union, should be established at all schools. These are the only means of uniting educators and laying the foundations for a political and industrial fight against the implementation of the sell-out deal.

The CFPE has outlined a series of demands to address the needs of teachers and the crisis in public education.

Teachers need to turn to their colleagues, who face similar attacks across the country and internationally. Educators globally have been involved in strikes and protests, often in defiance of the unions, against low wages, overwork and exposure to the pandemic.

Unified action can and should be developed with other sections of workers, including public sector staff, such as healthcare workers, who confront similar pay caps and intolerable conditions.

Above all, what is posed is the need for a new socialist perspective, which rejects the subordination of education and other crucial areas of social life to the dictates of big business and the capitalist governments, both Labor and Liberal-National Coalition, which enforce it.

The crisis in public education poses nothing less than the need for a reorganisation of society aimed at placing the vast resources created by the working class under public ownership and democratic workers’ control.

To take forward this fight, we encourage teachers and education staff in Victoria and across the country to contact the CFPE today:

Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com

Facebook: facebook.com/commforpubliceducation
facebook.com/groups/opposeaeusellout/

Twitter: @CFPE_Australia



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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