

The Australian Education Union betrayal of Victorian public school workers and the need for rank-and-file committees

Committee For Public Education
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There are sharp lessons to be drawn by teachers and public school workers in the state of Victoria and throughout the country in the aftermath of the recent ratification of a sell-out industrial agreement cooked up by the Australian Education Union and the state Labor government of Premier Daniel Andrews.

There is no question that the anti-democratic ramming through of the deal marks a setback.

The final ballot of all school staff employees was conducted by the Department of Education with absolutely no independent oversight. The principals of each school, in some cases along with the AEU delegate, counted the votes and sent the results to head office. It in turn instructed schools to destroy the ballot papers.

Understandably, last Thursday's announcement that the agreement passed has been met with considerable skepticism regarding the bona fides of the vote. Increasing numbers of teachers have joined the CFPE Facebook page opposing the deal with dozens announcing their resignation from the union.

The bureaucratic method with which the agreement was imposed is inextricably linked to its reactionary contents. Base wages will nominally rise by less than 2 percent a year over the next four years, well under half the current official inflation rate, let alone the real hikes in cost of living being endured by the working class. That is, the agreement represents a substantial wage cut.

In addition, the deal will do nothing to mitigate the untenable workloads and onerous working conditions within the schools; and the enormous crisis of the grossly underfunded public education system will be exacerbated.

At the same time, however, important and unprecedented opposition was registered against the AEU-Labor agreement. Last month's state-wide ballot of school workers, union and non-union members, saw more than one-third, 38 percent, vote "no." Well over 20,000 teachers and Education Support (ES) staff saw through the AEU's campaign of misinformation, censorship, and threats and took a defiant stand in defence of their wages and working conditions and the public education system.

This opposition, together with the turn of an important layer of educators towards the Committee for Public Education (CFPE), is part of an emerging radicalisation of teachers, workers and young people in Australia and internationally. This is expressed in a sharp increase in strikes, industrial actions, and protests as the working class begins to confront governments and unions imposing

austerity measures, escalating inflation, attacks on democratic rights and militarism and war.

The task now confronting educators in Victoria is to work through the implications of the AEU's latest betrayal, join the ranks of the CFPE—a rank-and-file committee independent of and opposed to the AEU—and help organise the widespread oppositional sentiment within the schools, developing a political and industrial counter-offensive.

Not a single step forward can be taken within the AEU. The union shares responsibility for the crisis of the public education system and terrible conditions endured by teachers, with every industrial agreement pushed through in the previous decades enforcing the situation. The AEU bureaucracy comprises an affluent, upper-middle class layer, with senior officials receiving a quarter of a million dollars in annual salaries. These privileges are "earned" by imposing the demands of the ruling elite, against the interests of school workers.

Nowhere has this dynamic been as clearly illustrated as with the AEU's enforcement of the reopening of the schools amid the COVID-19 pandemic. This measure was openly demanded by the unelected "National Cabinet," made up of the then Morrison federal and all the state governments, the majority Labor led. The return to face-to-face teaching was a means of ensuring that working parents could be forced back to their workplaces, in order to maintain corporate profit rates.

The union played a central role in implementing the reckless and dangerous reopening, which has contributed to the record wave of infection and illness across Australia in the last five months. Conditions are now intolerable, with teachers and school staff reaching breaking point amid record staff shortages caused by the spread of the virus.

Numerous teachers have quit the AEU in disgust over the latest betrayal. For some others, especially older educators, the word "union" remains associated with a collective defence of jobs, wages, and conditions. This reflects a certain inertia of both language and thought. In reality, the AEU does not unite educators and school workers, it divides them. It does not fight for improved wages and conditions, but works for precisely the opposite, organising defeat after defeat.

This is not merely a question of the AEU and its current leadership. In Australia and internationally, the unions have

responded to the last four decades of economic globalisation by integrating themselves into the structures of the state and of management, enforcing the diktats of corporations and governments.

This is why the Committee for Public Education, which has politically led the fight against the AEU sellout, opposes the desperate appeals of different pseudo-left organisations, such as Socialist Alliance, Solidarity and its Melbourne Educators for Social and Environmental Justice (MESEJ), for teachers to remain in the union and confine any effort to defend wages and working conditions to the bureaucracy itself. This orientation only reflects the pseudo-lefts' determination to prop up the trade unions. Their false claim that pressure can be brought to bear to "democratise" the AEU expresses the bankruptcy of their political perspective.

Teachers and ES staff must build new, democratic, fighting organisations independent of the unions—rank-and-file committees, elected in every school. Led by trusted staff, these committees will fight for the widest unity of all educators—union and non-union members, contract and ongoing, graduates and the most experienced—together with supportive parents, students, and other community members. A unified state- and nation-wide network of rank-and-file committees would turn out to other sections of the working class—such as health workers, aged care workers and bus drivers, all confronting similar attacks on their jobs, wages, and conditions—and develop a common struggle for a properly resourced and run public education system.

The CFPE has proposed the following initial demands as the basis for this struggle:

- An immediate across-the-board pay increase to compensate for previous inadequate wage deals. Salaries fully indexed against inflation, with automatic monthly cost of living adjustments to ensure no educator is worse off in the future.

- Hire thousands of teachers and Education Support staff to end the current huge workloads and staffing crisis. Maximum class sizes of 18–20. End the burden of administrative tasks. Adequate time within school hours for planning, assessment and collaboration with colleagues.

- Transfer all teachers and support staff on temporary contracts to permanent positions.

- Implement the necessary public health care measures to combat COVID-19 in the schools, including mask wearing, social distancing and ventilation. End the cover-up of infections—teachers, students, and parents have the right to know about infections and clusters. Shift to properly-resourced remote learning while community infections are taking place.

- Teachers and school workers infected or forced to self-isolate must receive full income support, with no loss of accrued leave entitlements.

- Fully-funded, properly staffed, and high-quality support services for all students, including those with disabilities and those affected by the pandemic.

- Halt the privatisation of Australia's school system! No more public funds for elite private schools! Pour tens of billions of dollars into public education to reverse decades of under-funding and provide free, high-quality education to every child.

A fight for these demands immediately raises political issues.

The AEU-Labor government agreement in Victoria was driven by the ruling elite's push to make the working class bear the burden of an unprecedented, COVID-triggered debt and deficit crisis. Alongside the necessary lockdown restrictions that were implemented in 2020, the state Labor government funnelled billions of dollars to corporate interests, resulting in a \$200 billion state debt and \$19.5 billion deficit.

Now heeding the demands of finance capital and the global credit rating agencies, Premier Daniel Andrews is planning real wage cuts not just for teachers but for all public sector workers—including public servants and administrators, nurses and healthcare workers, and transport workers—with the government maintaining a 1.5 percent annual wage rise cap.

The AEU-Labor deal also establishes a damaging precedent for attacks on teachers in other states, in particular those in New South Wales. Moreover, it is a forewarning of what is to come under the recently elected federal Labor government of Prime Minister Anthony Albanese.

Immediately after taking office, the government issued statements warning of "dire economic challenges," with a post-election budget "black hole" to justify a pro-business austerity agenda. The Labor Party is an unalloyed representative of the interests of big business and finance capital. It will respond ruthlessly to any independent challenge from the working class, including through the utilisation of the anti-democratic and draconian Fair Work industrial regime designed by the previous Labor government and the trade unions.

The fight for rank-and-file committees is the fight to establish the political independence of the working class on the basis of a socialist and internationalist perspective. The Committee for Public Education was established by members and supporters of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), which alone advances this program. Together with its sister Socialist Equality Parties internationally, the SEP helped found the International Workers' Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC). The CFPE and SEP offer every assistance to teachers seeking to establish rank-and-file committees in their school and community. We urge all educators and school workers to contact us, develop the discussion, and above all join our ranks and help develop the necessary political and industrial struggle.

The Committee for Public Education can be reached here:

Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com

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